

Fierce Friends

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/22190272) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/22190272>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭 Módào Zǔshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù , 陈情令 The Untamed (TV)
Relationships:	Nie Mingjue & Wen Ning Wen Qionglin , Song Lan Song Zichen & Wen Ning Wen Qionglin , Niè Míngjué & Wēn Níng Wēn Qiónglín & Sòng Lán Sòng Zīchēn , Lan Huan Lan Xichen/Nie Mingjue , Song Lan Song Zichen/Xiao Xingchen , Jiang Cheng Jiang Wanyin/Wen Ning Wen Qionglin
Characters:	Nie Mingjue , Wen Ning Wen Qionglin , Song Lan Song Zichen , Wei Ying Wei Wuxian , Lan Yuan Lan Sizhui , Lan Qiren , Lan Huan Lan Xichen , Xiao Xingchen , A-Qing (Modao Zushi) , Jiang Cheng Jiang Wanyin , Jin Ling Jin Rulan , Lan Jingyi , Ouyang Zizhen
Additional Tags:	Friendship , No Plot/Plotless , Give Wēn Níng Friends , Literally just an excuse to write about our favorite fierce corpses hanging out , Probably ooc , Cinnamon Roll Wēn Níng Wēn Qiónglín , Rabbits , Because of course there's rabbits , Niè Míngjué's body does NOT cooperate , Wēn Níng Centric , Everyone loves Wēn Níng , Dysfunctional Family , But they try , Found Family , Please don't lose the fierce corpse , Now with ships , Plot? Maybe. , fierce corpses solving mysteries , Idiots in Love , Mutual Pining , there's so much pining , Graphic Depictions of Pining , now with plot , What Have I Done , God may judge me for my sins but I judge him for giving me free will to create , heart eyes motherfucker
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-01-08 Updated: 2021-11-14 Words: 32,055 Chapters: 26/?

Fierce Friends

by [TumblingTroublesomeTumbleweeds](#)

Summary

There's something to be said for being a fierce corpse, but it can also be a rather lonely existence. An unlikely friendship forms out of an odd situation.

Chapter 1

Being a fierce corpse was not at all what Nie Mingjue thought it would be.

He flexed his stiffening fingers.

Aside from the fact that his body didn't move with the same ease, his strength had nearly tripled and he wasn't able to get hurt.

He was able to fight endlessly without tiring, which was pretty cool. He stretched his arm above his head, testing his range of motion.

There was a soft plop from his side and he looked down with a grimace and picked up his arm. Of course. Being a fierce corpse might be okay except for the fact that his body parts didn't always stay in place.

Nie Mingjue made his way towards the medical building.

The only other fierce corpse around, the Ghost General Wen Ning, was speaking softly to a Gusu Lan healer. A disciple.

Apparently, the sudden influx of sentient fierce corpses had meant there was a need for them to stay somewhere. Preferably under supervision.

The Lan Sect had been nominated to be the fierce corpse babysitters because of their connection with the former Yiling Patriarch.

It wasn't so bad. Mingjue had settled in Qinghe for a bit, but the sect had changed under his brother's leadership and he just didn't fit in there anymore.

At least the fierce corpses didn't have to abide by the stupid rules, and he could see Xichen.

(If he was actually brave enough to seek his friend out)

At Mingjue's heavy footfalls, the pair looked up.

He could immediately see the way Wen Ning folded in on himself.

The disciple looked concerned, glancing at Nie Mingjue with a mix of defensiveness and fear.

"Chifeng-zun," Wen Ning greeted softly, timidly.

Mingjue almost snorted at his diffident demeanor.

He held up his detached arm and watched Wen Ning's eyes struggle to go wide in understanding.

He was startled when the smaller corpse carefully took his wrist and settled him into a chair.

The chains clanked.

“A-Xiao,” Wen Ning called to the disciple, “could you please bring me a needle and level three spirit binding thread?”

“Of course, Ning-qianbei!” the disciple from earlier bounded off. But not before leveling a dark look at Mingjue.

He turned his attention to Wen Ning as the disciple returned. The boy hovered behind Wen Ning like a guardian, shooting wary looks at Mingjue.

Mingjue ignored them. Apparently the Ghost General was quite popular with the younger crowd. Who would have guessed?

He watched the shorter man carefully make each stitch, his gentle features intent.

He had never had much interaction with the Ghost General. He had fought him before, when he had been alive, and had been amazed at the sheer strength the other possessed. He had also, apparently, fought him while dead and put a very large hole in his chest.

Back when he was alive, he had believed the Ghost General to be a monster. A violent killing machine.

Instead the Ghost General was timid and soft-spoken. The violent killing machine was more like an easily startled rabbit.

The reality had shocked him.

Wen Ning glanced up at him before glancing back down hurriedly when their gazes met.

That was another thing about him.

He absolutely refused to make eye contact with Mingjue.

The former sect leader had seen the timid man make eye contact with nearly everyone else, so it wasn't just him being timid.

While alive, Nie Mingjue was aware that people thought he was more brawn than brain. Sure he enjoyed fighting, but he was also capable of being observant. He was a sect leader after all.

So he had put his observation skills to use now.

Which is how he had come to the conclusion that Wen Ning treated him very differently than he did everyone else.

Wen Ning regarded him with a nervousness that, had he been alive, would have had him shaking in fear.

Sure, he had put a hole through the guy's sternum at one point, but he hadn't been totally with it.

"All done," the low voice reached his ears, pulling him from his thoughts, "those stitches should hold better, the thread is thicker"

Wen Ning moved to leave but Mingjue grabbed his wrist.

As a fierce corpse, Mingjue's strength was unrivaled even by Wen Ning, so it was an easy matter to trap him.

If Wen Ning could pale he would have. As it was, he shifted anxiously from foot to foot with his head bowed and face hidden by his hair.

Unsure why he had done that, but not willing to back down, Mingjue fixed his stare on the timid corpse.

"You were a medic while alive right?"

"Well...my sister was. I helped, but I wasn't very good at it"

Sister.

The Wen woman they had burned alive.

As much as he had hated the Wens, seeing a woman burned alive had been horrific. He had disagreed with that course of action.

She hadn't made a sound as the flames swallowed her.

"I wasn't good at much," his voice was soft.

Nie Mingjue studied him. He felt a pang of guilt. Being dead changed his perspective on a lot. Without the haze of anger brought on by his qi, he was able to think clearly. Killing the Wens at the Burial Mounds had been an unnecessary and cruel thing to do. Forcing Wen Ning to watch while they killed his sister was another. Then to be held captive by the Jins...

Yeah. They could've done better.

"You do a fine job reattaching my limbs," Mingjue patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. Wen Ning staggered under the touch.

"Thank you," he stared at the ground. Nie Mingjue found himself fascinated by the long lashes that swept colorless cheeks.

An awkward silence settled over them before Mingjue released his wrist.

"Well." he frowned, "thank you"

"You're welcome," came the soft response.

Nie Mingjue fled the room with as much dignity as he could.

After that, Mingjue had taken to observing Wen Ning more than before.

The shorter corpse seemed to be close to the kids that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji seemed to have accumulated.

The two Lans, an Ouyang, and a Jin followed him around like ducklings.

The sight of the fearsome Ghost General playing babysitter was one that would have made Mingjue laugh if he was capable of producing anything more than a strange grating noise.

Wen Ning doted on them, particularly the more Lanlike Lan boy.

Sizhui, Mingjue thought.

The Jin boy surprised him since Wen Ning had killed his parents.

He supposed if the boy could forgive Wei Wuxian, he could forgive Wen Ning. Now that Mingjue knew what it was like to be a mindless fierce corpse, he had an understanding of why Wen Ning had done what he had done.

There were a lot of things he was discovering about the Ghost General.

Like now.

Now, Nie Mingjue stared at the Ghost General, terrifying monster of legend, slayer of hundreds, loyal attack dog of the equally feared Yiling Patriarch, sitting quietly on the grass surrounded by bunnies.

The younger corpse's posture was relaxed. A far cry from the perpetual tension in his shoulders.

The first thought that flickered through Mingjue's head was "cute".

He supposed the smaller male was much like a rabbit himself; shy, jumpy and hid whenever there were too many people.

Mingjue took a step and Wen Ning stiffened. The bunny on his lap startled.

Once he saw who it was, Wen Ning settled slightly.

At Mingjue's heavy approach, the rabbits scattered. He dropped down next to Wen Ning with a heavy thump.

He still wasn't quite used to just how heavy his body had become.

Disappointment flickered across Wen Ning's face as the rabbits fled.

"Why do you still wear these?" Mingjue tugged the chains.

Wen Ning fidgeted.

“A reminder,” he said. “A reminder of where I came from”

Slowly, the rabbits had returned and Wen Ning’s posture was content once again.

“Do you ever get used to it?” Mingjue asked, holding out a dead hand to a large rabbit.

It bit him but he didn’t feel pain.

“It takes time to come to terms with being a corpse,” Wen Ning said slowly. “I don’t know if you ever get truly used to it”

“Do you hate me?” Nie Mingjue asked suddenly, approaching what had been bothering him directly.

Wen Ning blinked slowly.

“Chifeng-zun,” he looked at the ground, tangled hair hiding his face. “I was under the impression it was you who hated me”

“No,” Mingjue is incapable of shaking his head. “I don’t. I might have once. But death has a way of changing one’s perspective”

Wen Ning nodded.

“For the record, I don’t hate you either”

Something about the words made a peculiar warm feeling bloom in Mingjue’s rotting chest cavity.

If anyone had told him he would one day be a fierce corpse sitting in a field with the Ghost General and surrounded by bunnies, he probably would’ve run them through with Baxia.

He poked at another rabbit, ignoring the exasperated glance Wen Ning shot him when he got bit again.

Maybe this wasn’t so bad.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wen Ning wasn't sure why Chifeng-zun had started talking to him, but he couldn't say he was unhappy about it.

His weird half-life wasn't terrible, but it did get lonely. Sure, he had A-Yuan and his friends, and Young Master Wei to an extent (Young Master Wei had been...occupied since he got married and Wen Ning had sort of fallen by the wayside), but it wasn't the same.

In life, he was painfully shy and it was difficult to make friends. Being a fierce corpse only made it impossible.

He was used to people disliking him. First, for being himself. Then for being a Wen. Then for being a fierce corpse. Also, for being the Ghost General.

So for Chifeng-zun to go out of his way to talk to Wen Ning...

Well, the other man could understand Wen Ning in a way no one else could. It was nice having someone else who felt the same things, who was in a similar situation.

Sometimes, in the deepest part of himself, he hated Young Master Wei for having brought him back to consciousness. He hated the lonely half-existence he'd been condemned to and often wondered if it was divine punishment for the sins of his family.

Then he immediately felt guilty for it.

He was grateful he got to see A-Yuan grow up loved and cared for. He was grateful he was able to watch him grow and was able protect him and his friends.

But there will be a day when A-Yuan no longer needs his protection.

Jie, I hope your next life is kinder than this one.

It was with these thoughts that Wen Ning laid beneath his tree.

It was a nice tree; tall and proud. Before they had built houses on the edges of the Cloud Recesses for the local population of conscious fierce corpses, Wen Ning would spend his time under this tree.

Unlife was painfully long when you didn't need to sleep and Wen Ning often remained unaware of the passage of time as he laid in the dirt trying to become one with it.

A rustling in the bushes drew Wen Ning's attention and he sat up as black robes came into view.

Wen Ning stared up into the semi-familiar face of yet another fierce corpse.

Song Zichen held out his hand. Wen Ning remembered the other corpse was mute and stood up, holding his hand out, palm up.

I was told I could find you here. Song Zichen wrote, the sensation of his fingertip dull.

“You were looking for me?” Wen Ning asked curiously. He didn’t even know the Taoist priest was in Gusu.

You are like me. I would like to talk.

Wen Ning was hesitant. His last encounter with the man had been rather unfriendly. To be fair, neither one was in complete possession of their consciousness.

“Okay,” Wen Ning sat down again. Song Zichen looked slightly disdainful of the dirt and gingerly sat on a rock. “I’m sorry how things ended up the last time we saw each other”

Not your fault. No need for apologies.

Wen Ning nodded.

“What. What did you want to talk about?”

Do you ever get used to it?

“Used to what?” Wen Ning queried.

Existing without living.

“Oh,” Wen Ning stared at the ground. Chifeng-zun had asked something similar. “I guess? You just kind of. Make peace with it?”

He can tell his answer wasn’t what Song Zichen was looking for.

Do you get lonely?

Wen Ning gaped.

“Um. I don’t. What do you mean?”

Song Zichen gave him a Look. Wen Ning wilted.

“Yes, I do,” stiff fingers smoothed over the grass, the sensation dull. “Being...like us isn’t easy. We can’t do the same things other people can do, feel what others can feel. Even when I was alive I was too shy to make friends now that I’m dead it’s impossible”

Song Zichen nodded.

“I. I have Young Master Wei.” Wen Ning said, “but he’s been busy”

He doesn't spend time with you anymore?

"Oh! No! Nothing. Nothing like that..." Song Zichen gave him another Look. "...it's not his fault," Wen Ning said miserably. "He's married now. He has better things to do than come bother with me"

Song Zichen studied him for a long moment and it made Wen Ning nervous.

"But I also. Chifeng-zun sometimes talks to me?"

The look Song Zichen sent him was definitely one of pity.

Do you hate him for it? Wei Wuxian.

"For being busy?"

For bringing you back.

Wen Ning froze. How did-? He was just thinking about this.

"His heart was in the right place," Wen Ning said, unable to answer that question because even Wen Ning wasn't sure sometimes. Song Zichen looked at him and Wen Ning got the feeling the other man could tell.

"Xue Yang brought you back"

Song Zichen nodded and squeezed Wen Ning's hand before letting it drop.

They sat in silence for awhile. It was kind of nice, having other company. Wen Ning felt something like happiness at the fact that someone else was talking to him.

"Are you here long, Daozhang?" Wen Ning asked, holding out his hand again.

Song Zichen tilted his head, dark eyes studied Wen Ning unblinkingly.

The Lan Sect is trying to figure out how to help my companions. So I will stay until they are okay.

Wen Ning nodded.

"Do you want to see the bunnies?"

Song Zichen sent him a strange look.

"Come on," Wen Ning gestured, stiffly getting to his feet.

He was quietly happy that Song Zichen followed.

I imagine Wen Ning has complicated feelings about being turned into a conscious fierce corpse.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Song Lan didn't know what to make of the Ghost General.

His fellow fierce corpse was...a mess, to say the least. His robes were tattered and unkempt. His hair was knotted and tangled and covered in bits of plant debris. The heavy chains on his wrists and ankles were beginning to rust.

Song Lan shuddered at the idea of being so messy. The germs alone...

But it was the way the other man held himself that made Song Lan pause; as though he was trying to make himself as small as possible.

He had heard tales of the Ghost General while he had been alive. A fierce corpse who was under the Yiling Patriarch's control, who would tear righteous cultivators limb from limb and feast on their innards.

The reality of the Ghost General was a diffident, nervous young man with sweet, gentle features who came across as rather naive. A bit like a shy version of Xingchen.

He followed the Ghost General into a clearing and stopped in amazement.

The clearing was filled with hundreds of rabbits; mostly white, few black, and some grey mixed in.

There were so many of them.

Wen Ning settled cross-legged in the grass and looked up at Song Lan.

The rabbits were clearly familiar with and fond of the Ghost General because they immediately crowded around him.

Song Lan sat next to him, careful not to sit on a rabbit.

It was quite peaceful in the rabbit clearing. Wen Ning didn't push for conversation and the rabbits quickly got used to Song Lan and started hopping closer.

"Wen Ning," a booming voice startled the rabbits. "I figured you would be here"

"Chifeng-zun," Wen Ning said, looking up. Song Lan followed his gaze.

Former Nie Sect Leader, Nie Mingjue, was a formidable man; he was clad in simple but tidy green robes. His dark hair was pulled into a neat ponytail.

If even Chifeng-zun was able to look decent, why was Wen Ning such a mess??

“Who is this?” Nie Mingjue seemed to attempt a frown, but his dead facial muscles did little more than twitch.

“This is Song-daozhang,” Wen Ning said.

“I heard about you,” Nie Mingjue sat next to Wen Ning heavily. Song Lan suppressed his internal grimace. The man was probably not particularly graceful in life either.

Being dead had a habit of making one significantly heavier. Song Lan supposed it was called “dead weight” for a reason.

“You and your friend had that thing with Xue Yang, right?”

Song Lan nodded. He didn’t really want to talk about that.

Nie Mingjue held out his hand to poke at a fat rabbit that promptly nipped at him before scurrying off.

“You need to move slower,” Wen Ning spoke up from where he was surrounded by several rabbits. It was actually quite adorable.

“They don’t like me,” Nie Mingjue shrugged, unbothered.

A curious white rabbit hopped over to Song Lan and wiggled it’s nose. It stood on it’s hind legs and looked at him almost inquisitively.

He was again reminded of Xingchen and cautiously stretched out his hand.

The rabbit sniffed it before hopping into his lap.

“Sure,” Nie Mingjue said dryly, “but they like you”

Wen Ning’s entire countenance brightened somehow as he looked at Song Lan.

“What is that?” Nie Mingjue’s loud voice was amused as he reached out to Wen Ning’s hair. “Is that a twig?”

The Ghost General patted his tangled hair and dirt tumbled out of it. Song Lan would have grimaced if his facial muscles would let him.

Why do you not take care of yourself? Song Lan wrote on Wen Ning’s hand.

His fellow fierce corpse ducked his head with an aura of sheepishness.

“I never really...I guess I’ve never worried about it?” Wen Ning blinked, “I mean, it’s not like I’m alive or anyone is really going to see me? And I tend to destroy clothes pretty fast...”

Nie Mingjue pulled a clod of grass from somewhere on the back of Wen Ning’s head and held it up.

His arm promptly fell onto Wen Ning’s lap, scaring off the rabbit that had been dozing off.

A fat black rabbit nipped at Nie Mingjue's wrist.

The former sect leader let out a fairly colorful expletive that had Wen Ning looking a bit scandalized.

Song Lan stared at his two companions; one, a haphazard mess with twigs in his tangled hair and a disembodied muscular arm holding onto a clump of grass next to an irate rabbit in his lap. The other held together with thick black thread and currently staring at the disembodied muscular arm with an expression that would be annoyance if his dead facial features would allow it.

Amusement bubbled up inside him as the surreality of the situation sank in.

Three dead men sitting in a lush green field surrounded by hundreds of rabbits with no expectations of anything.

For the first time in a long time, Song Lan felt something light where his heart would be and the pervasive loneliness dissipated for the moment.

The Ghost General picked up Nie Mingjue's arm and withdrew spirit binding thread and a thick needle from a pouch on his waist.

With the air of someone who had done this several times before, Wen Ning began to stitch Nie Mingjue's arm back to his shoulder while fending off inquisitive bunnies.

"Oops," the Ghost General paused.

"What?" Chifeng-zun peered down. "Oh..."

Song Lan leaned in too and blinked at the incongruous sight.

Wen Ning had somehow managed to sew his own hand to the arm.

"Huh," with a sharp tug, Wen Ning ripped his hand free; the threads tearing through his dead flesh with a disturbing squish. Song Lan would have winced if he thought Wen Ning could feel pain.

Although he was a bit disturbed by Wen Ning's lack of care for himself.

Nie Mingjue seemed unperturbed as he picked bits of Wen Ning out of the stitches and flexed his arm.

Song Lan shook his head.

What an odd path his life - unlife? - had sent him on.

SL is v concerned about the germs.

I'm gonna have fun with NMJ losing his body parts at terrible times.

WN is a soff bby.

Chapter 4

“You let not one, not two, but three fierce corpses loose on the world?” Lan Qiren looked like he was going to have an aneurysm.

Wei Wuxian exchanged a glance with his husband, who said nothing.

“Well...it went like this...”

Wei Ying smiled from his position a few feet away from the trio of fierce corpses.

Wen Ning and Song Zichen were listening to Nie Mingjue tell a, rather violent, tale from the Sunshot Campaign. Wen Ning listened with rapt attention and an awed air around him. Song Zichen was expressionless.

Really, the Taoist priest reminded Wei Ying of his beloved Lan Zhan.

When he had brought Nie Mingjue’s consciousness back as a favor to Lan Xichen, he hadn’t expected this development.

He had to say though, he was happy Wen Ning was making friends. He knew he had been somewhat neglectful of his friend as of late and it made him feel guilty.

Wei Ying had always had conflicting feelings about having turned his gentle-natured friend into a fierce corpse. Wen Ning was easily his most loyal friend. Even after everything that had happened, Wen Ning stayed by his side and defended him.

He knew Wen Ning’s existence was a difficult one.

Nie Mingjue slammed his fist into the ground to demonstrate something and Wen Ning startled backwards into Song Zichen who righted him.

Nie Mingjue let out a sound that was probably meant to be a laugh, drowning out Wen Ning’s apologies.

Wei Ying remembered why he was here and he approached the trio.

Three pairs of corpse-black eyes turned to him.

“Wei-gongzi,” Wen Ning bowed.

“Aiya, A-Ning, I told you not to call me that!” Wei Ying waved his hand. “Making friends?”

Wen Ning glanced shyly at the other two fierce corpses.

“Wei Wuxian,” Nie Mingjue greeted.

“Chifeng-zun,” he smiled before turning to Song Zichen. The priest immediately looked interested. “Song-daozhang, we ran into a minor problem with your friends...”

Wen Ning gently touched Song Zichen’s shoulder comfortingly. Wei Ying was surprised because he knew Wen Ning didn’t particularly like physical contact.

“We can get past it, but we need a manuscript that is believed to have been in the possession of your old temple before the massacre”

Song Zichen nodded.

“Daozhang,” Wen Ning said softly, causing everyone to look at him. He shrunk under the scrutiny. “I will come with you, if you want?”

Song Zichen hesitated before nodding.

“Sure why not,” Nie Mingjue shrugged. “It’ll be interesting to see what’s been going on in the world”

Wei Ying smiled to himself. He felt rather like a parent who’s child made their first friends.

He presented Song Zichen with a notebook and a chunk of charcoal that could be used to write.

“Probably easier to communicate this way, yeah?” Wei Ying grinned. Song Zichen accepted the present and bowed.

“...and that’s where they went!” Wei Wuxian finished his explanation. “To Baixue Temple! Or, what remains of it”

“My point stands,” Lan Qiren gritted out. “You allowed three fierce corpses to run loose”

“It’s Wen Ning, Nie Mingjue and Song Zichen,” Wei Wuxian shrugged. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

.....

“Aahhh!!!”

Song Lan and Nie Mingjue looked up at a series of heavy thumps following the scream.

Wen Ning was tumbling down the hill ahead of them. Nie Mingjue stepped forward and caught him without stumbling.

Are you okay? Song Lan wrote on his arm.

Wen Ning looked up at them sheepishly. Despite not being particularly small, bracketed by Nie Mingjue’s meaty arms with his hair in even worse disarray than normal, he looked a little pathetic.

Both Nie Mingjue and Song Lan felt a stirring of protectiveness.

“I got scared by something in the bushes...” he pointed to where the bushes rustled again.

What kind of horrible creature was enough to scare a fierce corpse?

Song Lan withdrew his sword as the rustling got louder and their adversary revealed itself.

“Really?” Nie Mingjue said flatly.

A long-legged deer stepped out, glancing at them with a distinctly unimpressed air.

Song Lan and Nie Mingjue exchanged a long-suffering glance and sighed. Wen Ning looked embarrassed.

Well, when that fierce corpse was Wen Ning: anything.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The trio of corpses had been traveling for a week. Given the fact they had no need for sleep or to eat and they could travel without tiring, they were two days away from Baixue Temple.

Well, they would have been two days away if they didn't keep getting sidetracked.

The first time was when they passed through the outskirts of Lanling and had run into the junior disciples that were so fond of Wen Ning.

"Y-you're...Chifeng-zun!" one of the Lan boys pointed at Nie Mingjue.

Jin Ling eyed him warily.

"Didn't he put a hole through your chest, Wen-qianbei?" he tugged Wen Ning's sleeve.

"It's okay now!" Wen Ning reassured him.

Jin Ling didn't look entirely convinced.

"You know, Wei-qianbei was able to figure out who you were just by looking at your chest!" the noisy Lan blurted out.

"Jingyi..." the quieter Lan sighed. Jin Ling choked. A boy clad in Ouyang green bit back a smile.

Nie Mingjue, for his part, clearly wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"You're even stronger than Wen-qianbei! No offense, Wen-qianbei," he looked at Wen Ning who shrugged. "How did you get to be so strong? Hey, do you think if I were to become a fierce corpse I could be that strong?"

"Jingyi!" Jin Ling, the Ouyang boy and the quieter Lan all shouted, clearly horrified by their friend's aspirations to become a fierce corpse.

Song Lan was secretly amused. Wen Ning met Nie Mingjue's gaze over the tops of the disciples' heads and tried to twist his dead muscles into a smile.

They had stayed to join the disciples on a night hunt before moving on.

The next distraction had come in the form of a young girl who's family lived in a rural farmhouse between Lanling and Qinghe.

Her family's crops were being eaten by mysterious undead goats.

They discovered a nearby farmer was poisoning goats with corpse powder and unleashing them on families that he believed had wronged him. After turning him into the authorities, they had dispatched the goats.

Wen Ning had wanted to keep one as a pet but both Song Lan and Nie Mingjue had said no, much to his disappointment.

Now, they were investigating strange occurrences in a village outside of Qinghe.

As the former sect leader responsible for the village, Nie Mingjue felt obligated to see what the trouble was.

Which is how they found themselves in a clearing surrounded by monstrous half-humanoid lumps of grey flesh. Some crawled along the ground using malformed arms, some walked upright on impossibly thin legs. They didn't possess any discernible facial features except a hole where their mouths should be.

Song Lan recalled Xue Yang experimenting with creatures like this as he rushed the one nearest him, slashing at it with Fuxue.

It was an unfortunate combination of corpse powder, spirit binding talismans, and long-deceased, rotting corpses.

Nie Mingjue launched forward with a roar, tearing apart a ghoul with his bare hands and getting splattered with some kind of viscous black fluid.

Song Lan grimaced. Lovely.

With more grace, he launched himself into the clump of creatures and did his best to not get covered in ghoul gunk.

Song Lan was unsure how long they had been fighting. The hideous creatures coming in droves.

He felt something that would have been gratitude if his emotions were stronger, that fierce corpses didn't get tired.

He caught sight of Wen Ning uprooting a tree with the chains around his wrist and launching it through the air where it slammed a cluster of ghouls into a large rock with a splat.

He heard an expletive by his feet as something bounced along the ground.

He dispatched the ghoul he had been fighting and turned to look.

Nie Mingjue's head was lying a few feet away under a tree, the black stitches torn.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me!" the former Nie Sect Leader's head cursed violently. "Of all the things to happen-!" his head was rolling in irritated circles.

Song Lan glanced over to where his headless body was still charging the ghouls, tearing them apart limb from limb.

Wen Ning scooped up the disembodied head.

“Apologies Chifeng-zun,” he set Nie Mingjue’s head on a branch, “we don’t want you getting stepped on”

“This is fucking ridiculous,” Nie Mingjue’s head griped, watching his body stumble around and flail his fists. “Left, you idiot! Go to your left!”

Song Lan shook his head at the absurdity of the situation before turning to the nearest ghoul and slashing it with his sword.

The clearing was filled with Wen Ning’s roars mingling with the howls and shrieks of the ghouls and Nie Mingjue’s increasingly creative swearing as he tried to direct his uncooperative body.

Song Lan once again wondered just how exactly he had gotten here.

Eventually, the ghouls were all dispatched. Song Lan felt gross and in need of a bath.

Wen Ning emerged from a pile of splinters that used to be a tree before a particularly strong ghoul had hurled Wen Ning into it. He was barely recognizable under the ghoul gunk and tree pieces clinging to his frame.

Nie Mingjue’s headless body was beginning to wander off, undoubtedly looking for another fight if the swinging of his fists was any indication.

“Would somebody please, for the love of the gods, keep me from wandering off?” Nie Mingjue said from the tree.

Wen Ning hurried over, dodging a heavy fist as he redirected Nie Mingjue’s body. Song Lan picked up his head and carried it over. Once in proximity, Nie Mingjue’s body seemed to settle.

Song Lan held the former sect leader’s head on his body while Wen Ning dug out his spirit-binding thread and began to painstakingly stitch head to body.

Once that was completed, Song Lan pulled out his notebook and wrote on his piece of paper.

I need to get cleaned up.

Wen Ning glanced down at himself and nodded.

The trio found a nearby river. Song Lan wasted no time in stripping and getting in, washing his clothes while he bathed. He wanted the ghoul gunk off thank you very much.

Wen Ning waded in in his clothes, submerging himself under water briefly before climbing back out and shaking himself like a dog.

Song Lan looked at him in disbelief. Even Nie Mingjue shook his head.

“Strip and get back in,” the former sect leader crossed his arms. “You’re a mess”

Wen Ning meekly obeyed and Nie Mingjue waded over to him. None too gently, he began to detangle Wen Ning’s hair.

“The fuck...” Nie Mingjue ripped at a stubborn tangle harshly. If Wen Ning was alive, his scalp would probably have started bleeding from the force, “when was the last time you combed this mess?”

Wen Ning’s silence as he tried to remember caused Song Lan and Nie Mingjue to exchange an exasperated glance.

Song Lan was done washing himself and his clothes, so he waded over to help Nie Mingjue with the disaster that was Wen Ning.

Just because you’re dead doesn’t mean you should stop caring. Song Lan wrote on Wen Ning’s shoulder.

Wen Ning ducked his head sheepishly.

Song Lan and Nie Mingjue were nearly the same height and Wen Ning was several centimeters shorter than both, so it wasn’t particularly difficult height wise.

The pair worked in silence. It was clear that Wen Ning’s hair hadn’t been brushed in years. Wen Ning sat quietly under their ministrations, allowing his companions to tug and rip at his hair until it was combed smooth and free of twigs, dirt, and leaves.

He peered up at them through wet bangs and Song Lan wiped at a spot of ghoulish gunk below Wen Ning’s ear.

Well, this was as good as it was going to get.

They emerged from the river and got dressed without waiting for their robes to dry. It wasn’t like they felt the cold anyways.

Except, Wen Ning’s robes were a disaster. They were little more than a handful of rags and splinters at this point. His high speed acquaintance with the tree had practically shredded the already tattered clothes.

Song Lan shook his head and made a gesture. Nie Mingjue snorted.

“Yeah. We’ll find something. You,” he turned to Wen Ning. “Stay put”

Wen Ning nodded and sat on the ground.

Song Lan wondered if Wen Ning was this obedient with everyone. It was somewhat concerning and made Song Lan want to hide him away.

It was late when Song Lan and Nie Mingjue stumbled across a row of farmhouses.

Against Nie Mingjue's protests, Song Lan grabbed a pair of dark grey robes from the drying line of a nearby house and sent a silent apology to the owners along with a blessing for prosperity.

He didn't like it either, but Wen Ning definitely needed them more.

The Ghost General was sitting on the grass where they had left him. His hair had started drying and began to curl at the ends. It was actually kind of adorable.

He looked up at them and Song Lan wondered just how young he was.

"Where...?" Wen Ning blinked at the robes.

"Don't ask," Nie Mingjue huffed, sitting on a rock. "Get dressed and come over here"

Wen Ning was clearly confused but, again, obeyed.

The robes fit surprisingly well. A little tight around his shoulders and a bit short in the length, but nothing egregiously noticeable.

He made his way over to Nie Mingjue, who forced him to sit down in front of him and roughly grabbed his hair.

"If you're not going to take care of yourself," he started braiding with the same level of force he would probably use in a fight. "Then we need to make sure your hair at least stays neat"

If he was capable of it, Song Lan was pretty sure Wen Ning would start crying.

"This one thanks Chifeng-zun," Wen Ning said quietly.

"Don't thank me," he snorted, tying it off with a strip of fabric torn from the clean(er) part of Wen Ning's old robes. "I don't want to deal with having to comb the tangles out of your hair again"

Song Lan hid the smile that crossed his face. His companions were strange and unexpected, to say the least, but he was beginning to grow quite fond of them.

Chapter End Notes

The more I write, the more Song Lan and Nie Mingjue become the long-suffering parents of one not-so-fierce corpse.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wen Ning was decidedly confused.

He ran his hand down his hair, pulled into an impossibly tight braid from the sheer force of Chifeng-zun's hands.

The last person to dote on him like that had been his sister.

Sure, A-Yuan and his friends and Wei-gongzi would ask him if he was okay, but this was...different.

Was this friendship?

Wen Ning had pathetically minimal experience with friendship; too shy to interact with anyone outside his family while growing up, and then becoming a fierce corpse wasn't exactly conducive to making new friends. Or any friends at all, for that matter.

Wei-gongzi was something like a friend. But there was also this tie of loyalty to him that transcended normal friendship. He had seen Wei-gongzi at his worst, and in return Wei-gongzi had never judged him for anything. He was more than a friend, but Wen Ning's feelings for him weren't romantic. Maybe familial? But that wasn't quite right either.

A-Yuan and the other disciples were less his friends and more like his charges. He was also older than them by a good couple of decades.

Technically.

He had died at eighteen, which meant he was still technically in an eighteen year old's body. Only a year older than A-Yuan.

The thought of A-Yuan being older than him one day was...something.

Complicated enough to make his head spin.

Especially when he took into account the fact he was also technically older than Song-daozhang, but physically younger.

Whoa.

Song Zichen sent him a concerned look.

"I'm fine," Wen Ning smiled, trying to pretend his whole outlook hadn't just suddenly been shifted.

If he followed that train of thought...he was also technically older than Wei-gongzi's current body, despite Master Mo having been born at least a decade after.

"Why'd you stop?" Nie Mingjue frowned.

Well, there was someone who didn't tilt and shake his whole worldview. Nie Mingjue will always be older than him.

For some reason, that thought reassured him and Wen Ning was able to try to force his mouth muscles to smile.

"I was just thinking," Wen Ning said apologetically. Nie Mingjue's expression was like he was trying to raise an uncooperative eyebrow.

Being undead was a trip.

He snuck a glance at the silent Song Zichen and then at Chifeng-zun.

Were they friends?

They traveled together. They fought other undead together. They understood each other in a way no one else possibly could.

Friends.

They were odd friends; a former sect leader and a Taoist priest, bound together by even odder circumstances. But Wen Ning was quite happy with them.

Song Zichen tapped his shoulder and pointed to the buildings in the distance.

They were almost there. Baixue Temple.

Wen Ning cautiously reached out and took Song Zichen's hand in his own and squeezed it comfortingly. He could imagine how difficult this was. He had felt similarly crossing Qionggi Path.

Song Zichen looked at him, faint surprise on his dead face before returning the squeeze.

They made their way into the darkened temple looming up in front of them.

Cracked and falling to disrepair, the temple was eerily silent. The air heavy and oppressive, as though the cruel deeds were permanently twisted into the atmosphere. Darkened stains marred the stone walls and concrete floors.

Blood. Wen Ning's brain unhelpfully supplied.

He helpfully told it to shut up, please.

Being undead, Wen Ning could sense the restless spirits surrounding them. He knew his companions were able to as well, given Chifeng-zun's glancing around.

Song Zichen pulled out his notebook and began writing.

Let's find the manuscript.

The other two corpses nodded and followed Song Zichen across the open pavilion to the other side of the temple.

The stone was cracked, small tufts of sturdy grass venturing up to freedom. The wooden benches were rotted through. A well stood abandoned in a corner.

Wen Ning was so focused on his surroundings, he failed to watch where he was going, tripped, and stumbled a few steps.

Chifeng-zun reached out for him, but they all stared in horror as his arm chose that moment to detach from his body and went over the edge of the dried-up well along with Wen Ning.

After falling for what felt like an inordinately long time, Wen Ning hit the concrete bottom with a heavy smack.

Had he been alive, the fall probably would have killed him. As it was, he brushed himself off, picked up Nie Mingjue's arm, and looked up to where he could see the small faces of his companions.

"I'm okay!" he called up, a little uselessly as he waved Nie Mingjue's arm. Of course he was okay. He was already dead.

Whether that constituted as "okay" or not, was up for debate, but he focused on his more pressing problem.

How to get back up?

He looked at Chifeng-zun's arm.

"Don't suppose you could give me a hand?" he joked quietly.

He was not surprised when it made a rude gesture in his direction.

Chapter End Notes

Wen Ning is the butterfly meme when it comes to friendship.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Not for the first time on this journey did Nie Mingjue wonder just what the hell he'd gotten himself into.

He had agreed to travel to Baixue Temple in part because it wasn't like he had anything better to do and in part because it gave him the chance to get to know his fellow fierce corpses a bit more.

He had long since decided Wen Ning was a sweet, shy and clumsy mess. He suspected if the rest of the cultivation world were to discover the feared Ghost General spent more time tripping over his own feet and getting startled by small animals, things would have gone very differently all those years ago.

Despite his naive and somewhat simple nature, Wen Ning was fiercely loyal. Mingjue had seen that loyalty many times over and, if he thought it would make any difference to the past, he would feel guilty for the way he had thought of the Ghost General before.

He does harbor some guilt for his contribution to Wen Ning's suffering.

Without the bloody qi influenced haze, without any qi at all actually, Mingjue's mind is completely clear in a way it hasn't been since he was a young boy. Thanks to this clarity, he can look back and realize how everything was too perfectly skewed against Wei Wuxian.

Yet another thing to hate Jin Guangshan over. As if the list wasn't long enough, starting with the way his shadow hung over Meng Yao, prompting his deputy to leave Mingjue's side to try and chase after the manwhore for even the slightest scrap of affection.

Being undead was a very effective way of clearing one's mind.

He sometimes wondered if things would have been different if he had kept Meng Yao from leaving for Lanling, if he had never written the recommendation letter and kept him by his side...

But it's no use dwelling on the past. Mingjue couldn't change it. He might as well figure out where he's going from here.

Aside from Baixue Temple with his fellow fierce corpses.

Song Zichen was more of an enigma. He was quiet, although Mingjue couldn't fault him for that considering he didn't have a tongue, and very polite.

His loyalty to his previous companions was also rather remarkable.

He wasn't quite as easy to get to know as Wen Ning and Mingjue suspected that even if he did have a tongue, it wouldn't be much different. Mingjue had heard of him while alive, he was a cultivator of some renown with a reputation for being righteous and honorable but unapproachable.

All in all, his traveling companions and fellow fierce corpses were good company.

He just wished the youngest of the group would take care of himself.

In an odd way, Wen Ning reminded Nie Mingjue of Huaisang. Timid and generally somewhat useless but capable in the right circumstances. It didn't help that his soft features were far too gentle to be on a corpse.

He was also excessively clumsy.

As he stared down the well, he saw Wen Ning use his disembodied arm to wave back.

He would have rolled his eyes if he was capable.

"Can you climb?" Nie Mingjue shouted.

"The sides are too slippery!" Wen Ning called back up.

Song Lan tapped his shoulder.

Ask him if his chains reach.

"Do your chains reach?"

In response, a heavy metal chain flew through the air falling just short of the edge of the well.

Mingjue grabbed for it with his other arm, but it wasn't enough.

Well, that answered that.

If we tie bedsheets together, we can lower them down to him. Song Lan wrote on his arm.

"We're going to get something to haul you up!" Mingjue shouted.

"Do you want a hand?"

"What?"

Song Lan grimaced as best he could.

Suddenly, Mingjue's disembodied arm launched over the side of the well.

Mingjue sighed at Wen Ning's terrible sense of humor that only emerged at the weirdest times.

Song Lan withdrew spirit binding thread and stitched him on at the elbow. It was less skilled than Wen Ning usually managed, but functional.

“Right. You get your manuscript and I’ll get Wen Ning,” he said. Song Lan nodded and they separated.

Mingjue raided the bedrooms for anything he could use to make a rope. He found actual braided rope, but it was too frayed and degraded to hold the weight of Wen Ning.

Clumsily, he managed to knot several blankets, two pairs of pants and a robe together to form something long enough to reach. It took far longer than he had hoped it would, mostly because his stiff fingers didn’t work the same way.

At least they were still attached by skin and not flimsy thread. Periodically losing his large limbs is already inconvenient enough thank you very much.

Returning to the well, he glanced down. If he was alive, his heart would have dropped to his feet.

(If he was alive, he probably wouldn’t be here in the first place)

The well was empty.

Wen Ning was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Of course NMJ would find a way to lose WN.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Song Lan made his way to the library, hoping it hadn't been raided and he could find the manuscript.

Fortunately, it seemed like Baixue Temple remained undisturbed. Whether that was because of the horrible cruelty of the massacre, or whether it was respect keeping people away.

He felt a pang of sorrow as he looked around.

Yet another thing he was responsible for.

He wished a lot of things; wished he had been a better friend to Xiao Xingchen, wished he stayed in Baixue Temple, wished he killed Xue Yang rather than hand him over to Lanling Jin.

His biggest regret was going after Xue Yang. But even he knows that if he had the chance to go back and do it again, he would still take down the demonic cultivator.

Song Lan pushed open the door to the library. Like the rest of the temple, it had fallen into disrepair; the manuscripts moth-eaten and dusty.

It struck a painfully familiar chord in him. He recalled days as a junior disciple sitting amongst the books and scrolls with his martial brothers and sisters; laughing in between their studying.

The library was practically unrecognizable now; chunks of ceiling had begun to crumble, dust covered every inch. The wooden shelves and tables were rotting and falling apart.

Even so, Song Lan knew this library like the back of his hand. He knew where to go to look for his required book.

He was digging between the manuscripts hoping to find the one he needed when the door flew open with a thud.

Nie Mingjue was standing in the doorway. Song Lan tilted his head to express his confusion.

Was there something wrong with Wen Ning?

"I lost Wen Ning"

Song Lan stared at Nie Mingjue incredulously.

How did you lose Wen Ning? he wrote.

He was having a hard time believing his companion had managed to lose a fellow fierce corpse.

“I don’t know,” even with his frozen facial muscles, his expression was thunderous. “But Wen Ning is gone”

Song Lan didn’t know where to go from here.

As far as he knew, Wen Ning was firmly stuck at the bottom of a deep well with no way up. Yet somehow Wen Ning had left it.

What do we do?

“I don’t know,” Nie Mingjue growled. “I don’t even know where he is!”

Song Lan could hear the worry lurking under the aggressive tone. It mirrored his own. They had both become rather protective of the youngest member of their triad. His clumsiness and inability to take care of himself chief among the reasons for their current worry.

Where on earth could he be?

Suddenly, a rumbling sound drew their attention.

Nie Mingjue braced himself for a fight, Song Lan withdrew Fuxue.

The ground shuddered and broke and they braced themselves for whatever was going to emerge.

Given the horrors that had happened here, the resentful energy could have roused anything.

Then Wen Ning emerged from the ground like a ridiculously overgrown plant.

Dirt clung to his hair and skin and his new robes. He looked at them from a hole in the ground.

Song Lan felt disbelief move sluggishly through his dead veins.

“I got out,” Wen Ning said belatedly, clambering out of the hole.

The hole. In the ground. That Wen Ning somehow tunneled out of.

What?

Song Lan sighed. Nie Mingjue walked over and brushed the dirt off Wen Ning’s head.

Wen Ning closed his eyes at Nie Mingjue’s rough ministrations.

“You couldn’t have waited for me?” he griped, continuing to brush dirt off Wen Ning. “I had a rope”

“But you could have lost your arms trying to pull me out,” Wen Ning allowed the fussing, almost seeming to bask in it.

Song Lan had long began to suspect that Wen Ning was some form of kindness or affection deprived. He didn’t know much about Wen Ning’s life before becoming the Ghost General; he had only heard what kind of a monster he was and that was obviously false, but the way he seemed equal parts confused and content whenever they fussed over him made Song Lan feel sad.

“Then you can just sew it back on,” Nie Mingjue said. “Don’t do that again”

“Okay,” Wen Ning said, looking up at Nie Mingjue. “I’m sorry”

Song Lan shook his head and turned back to dig for the manuscript.

Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue soon joined him in his search and between the three of them, they found the ancient text.

Song Lan breathed an unnecessary sigh of relief at the fact that the manuscript was relatively unharmed.

His companions peered over his shoulder as he opened it and flipped through to make sure everything was intact. Aside from some damage around the edges, the writing was legible.

For the first time in a long time, tendrils of hope creep up Song Lan’s rotting interior.

“This will brings your friends back?” Nie Mingjue asked.

Master Wei said it could. Song Lan wrote. I hope it does.

Nie Mingjue and Wen Ning exchanged a sad glance.

“So do we,” Wen Ning said softly.

Song Lan felt a dull warmth bloom where his heart would be if he were alive.

He found he was grateful for meeting his strange companions and he genuinely hoped that they could have a chance to meet Xingchen.

Chapter End Notes

NMJ: *bops WN over the head* don’t scare us like that again!

SL: *disapproving mom friend stare*

WN: *sheepish* sorry...

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Double update! Woohoo!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wen Ning watched his companion as they left Baixue Temple.

Song Zichen was always quiet, but the quiet now was a different quiet than his normal quiet. More somber.

He knew they had all lost the people closest to them and they all carried their own scars. He knew nothing could be done for him, but maybe if he could help Song Zichen get his friends back and convince Chifeng-zun to talk to Zewu-jun he would be content.

Yes. That's what Wen Ning would do. He considered his traveling companions to be his friends and if he could help his friends be happy, that would be enough for him.

Wen Ning turned to look at the remains of Baixue Temple. He bowed and said a silent prayer of rest for the restless spirits he had been able to feel.

The trio of corpses started the trek back to the Cloud Recesses. Hopefully they would run into fewer complications than the trek to Baixue Temple because Wen Ning was beginning to run low on spirit binding thread.

They were making good time. But every time it seemed like things were going well, something would go wrong.

"It's raining," Wen Ning looked up at the first few raindrops.

"It's just a little bit," Nie Mingjue shrugged best he could. "We'll be fine"

Song Zichen gave him a flat look.

Do not tempt fate.

Nie Mingjue scoffed.

Lightning split the sky and the heavens opened.

Wen Ning looked at Chifeng-zun morosely. Song Zichen shook his head and shrugged.

Told you so. He wrote before his paper got soaked. He tore off a new sheet and hid it beneath his robes.

“We should probably take shelter,” Wen Ning said.

“Why?” Nie Mingjue asked, “rain won’t bother us”

Makes it hard to see.

“Alright,” Chifeng-zun was outvoted. “But there’s nowhere to stay. It’s not like we can go into a town and ask for a room at an inn...even if we did have money”

“Let’s stay there then,” Wen Ning pointed to a dilapidated manor in the distance.

“Right.” Nie Mingjue’s forehead twitched as though he was trying to raise an eyebrow. “Let’s take shelter in the creepy abandoned mansion”

We’re dead. Song Zichen wrote on paper that was rapidly becoming soggy. *What’s the worst that could happen?*

Wen Ning thought they needed to stop challenging the gods like that, and hadn’t Song-daozhang been the one to say don’t tempt fate?

But he led them towards the abandoned building anyways.

It was almost eerily quiet. Normally, Wen Ning was aware of other deceased in the area; spirits and corpses both. Particularly if they were full of resentful energy.

The silence in the air was somewhat unnerving.

“Well, seems peaceful enough,” Nie Mingjue poked his head into various rooms before settling on a low bench.

It creaked before collapsing beneath his weight with a crash.

With one of his many creative expletives, Chifeng-zun got to his feet and sat somewhere less likely to break.

It was indeed peaceful for several minutes until a rumble against the floor made them all look up.

“It’s not me this time,” Wen Ning hastily reassured them.

It was probably not very reassuring.

Song Zichen removed his sword just as the wall of the manor was unceremoniously smashed through by a horrendous looking undead beast.

Like some unholy combination of a bear, a cow and a deer, only double the size of all of them.

“The fuck is with these creatures!?” Nie Mingjue rushed the monster.

“This is what happens when a predator eats something filled with resentful energy and gets killed,” Wen Ning launched his chain around one massive forelimb. “In this case, the bear - I think it’s a bear - ate two things filled with resentful energy”

“I’m going to have a talk with Wei Wuxian,” Nie Mingjue grunted. “We need a better way to deal with these things”

Song Zichen rushed past them in a blur of black, sending them an impatient hand signal that Wen Ning interpreted as *stop talking and fight*.

Even for three powerful fierce corpses, they were quickly becoming overwhelmed by the beast. The sheer size and excessive amount of resentful energy was proving tough to handle.

If they had been alive, they would’ve been dead a long time ago.

Wen Ning felt rain land on his head and was struck with an idea.

He turned and ran full tilt at the wall, using his strength and his chains to haul himself up to the roof through a hole in the ceiling.

“What is he doing!?” Nie Mingjue’s roar reached Wen Ning, but the younger fierce corpse ignored him.

Wen Ning wrapped one chain securely around the decorative metal spire and the other around the neck of the creature.

“Get down from there!” Nie Mingjue’s shouted up. “You’re going to get electrocuted!”

Wen Ning decided he would remind Chifeng-zun later that they were dead and getting electrocuted didn’t actually hurt.

If anything, it felt kind of good.

Sure enough, lightning hit the spire and traveled down Wen Ning’s chains, through his body and into the creature, immobilizing it.

Wen Ning felt himself falling through the air. Despite being dead, his muscles retained the ability to be contracted by electricity so he found himself unable to move as he hit the ground.

There was a sickening pop and he realized he dislocated his shoulder. Fun.

From his position twisted on the ground, Wen Ning was unable to see the battle raging behind him but he had a wonderful view of the stars.

It was a clear night, so they were quite visible.

For lack of anything better to do, he admired the stars.

He wondered if his sister's soul had been reincarnated and whether she was looking at these same stars.

The thought was a comforting one.

He always missed her around this time of the year.

The sounds of battle began ceasing just as Wen Ning began to recover movement in his extremities.

He could hear Nie Mingjue shouting in the distance.

Suddenly, Song-daozhang's handsome face appeared over him.

Are you alright? he wrote on Wen Ning's arm.

"Just need to wait for the muscle contractions to loosen," Wen Ning said. "I should be fine in a bit"

Already he was beginning to get movement back. He imagined if he were alive, he would be in excruciating pain.

Nie Mingjue's head and leg came off.

Wen Ning sighed.

Song Zichen gave him a stern look.

Do not do that again.

Wen Ning sat up and twisted his shoulder back in place, getting to his feet and walking over to where the former sect leader's leg was awkwardly trying to flop away.

While Song Zichen was trying to find where Nie Mingjue's head had rolled off to, Wen Ning wrestled with the appendage.

Not for the first time he wondered why Nie Mingjue's limbs without his head were so aggressive.

At least his body wasn't getting far on one leg, but not for lack of trying.

Wen Ning may have taken a bit longer to reach him in an attempt to watch Chifeng-zun's headless body aggressively shove itself to it's remaining foot and promptly topple over. Repeatedly.

The physician in Wen Ning wondered why exactly Chifeng-zun's head and body were able to function separately. The undead in him wondered if he would be like that too in the event he lost his head.

He suspected not. But while he was morbidly curious about his morbidity, he did not particularly want to risk having his head detached from his body.

Wen Ning successfully reattached Chifeng-zun's ridiculously and unfairly muscular thigh, lamenting the fact his own body was rather lacking in that department, when he realized he was out of spirit binding thread.

Song Zichen returned with Nie Mingjue's irritated head beneath his arm. He must have seen him pause because he gave him a questioning look.

"I don't have enough thread for his head"

"Fuck"

Song Zichen ran a hand through his hair and made a gesture to indicate 'what now?'

"We take him back to Gusu"

"My body won't cooperate without my head," Chifeng-zun said from where his disembodied head sat between them. "Good luck getting me to go anywhere"

Wen Ning thought for a bit before inspiration struck.

"Let's do it like this!" Wen Ning rushed over to a wall and began stripping the thick vines down. Song Zichen held down Nie Mingjue's irate body.

With clumsy movements, Wen Ning bound the massive frame with no less than twenty vines nearly as thick as his arm.

"That should hold him," Wen Ning sat back and examined his work. "Especially since your body seems calmer when your head is nearby"

Song-daozhang fashioned a sling out of his outer robe and placed Nie Mingjue's head inside it before wrapping it around his torso.

"Great," came the muffled complaint in a flat tone. "This is going to be so much fun"

...

Wei Wuxian blinked at the sight in front of him.

Wen Ning was holding onto several vines wrapped around the headless body of Chifeng-zun like he was walking a particularly ornery pet. He looked...neater. But also incredibly dusty.

"Are we there yet?" he heard Nie Mingjue's voice from somewhere behind Song Lan, who was holding a battered looking book. "I recognize the tree we just passed. I'd very much like to be reattached"

"Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning bowed. Wei Wuxian sighed, stopping him from bowing further.

“I told you, A-Ning,” he idly brushed a leaf off Wen Ning’s hair, surprised to find it neatly contained in a braid. “I’m not your master, I’m your friend”

Wen Ning turned corpse black eyes on him.

The headless body took that moment to lunge in the direction of a tree and Wen Ning, caught off guard, stumbled. Song Lan jumped forward and helped haul Chifeng-zun’s uncooperative body back.

Wei Wuxian glanced at the vines binding the former sect leader.

They were poisonous creeping trellises. The deadliest vine in any region.

Because of course they were.

Wei Wuxian turned to hide his smile as he gestured for A-Ning and Song Lan to bring Chifeng-zun and the manuscript to the medical building.

Chapter End Notes

NMJ and SL really wish WN would stop making them worry tbh.

Chapter 10

nce his head was firmly reattached to his body, Nie Mingjue found Wen Ning sitting on a rock under the tree he seemed to like.

The younger fierce corpse had been strangely melancholy lately. More melancholy than normal. Something had been bothering him.

“Everything okay?” Mingjue crossed his arms.

Wen Ning looked up. Gods he was young. His face was delicate. Mingjue thinks he must have been quite handsome when he was alive.

“Don’t worry,” he said softly. “I’ll be okay soon”

“Budge over,” Mingjue said. Wen Ning obediently shifted on the rock and Mingjue lowered his large frame next to him.

They were pressed shoulder to shoulder. It was strange for Mingjue to not feel heat radiating off the person next to him but the dull weight of Wen Ning’s arm against his was strangely comforting.

“Out with it,” Mingjue nudged him, “what’s got you so down?”

“It’s my sister’s birthday today,” he said softly.

Mingjue vaguely remembered the Wen woman. She had been a renowned physician and Mingjue had had a grudging respect for her before the bloody haze of his sabre had clouded everything and all Wens were Evil.

“I was forced to watch them kill her”

Mingjue now knew the truth behind everything. The way Jin Guangshan had manipulated everyone and the situation. He knew Guangshan had lied about capturing the Wen siblings. That they had willingly given themselves up for a broken promise.

Even dead he can still feel a flicker of his old rage.

He had known Wen Ning had been forced to watch them kill her but at the time he had assumed the Ghost General was an unfeeling fierce corpse.

Now that he knew otherwise, the guilt settled deeply in his rotting chest.

Mingjue carefully wrapped his arm around Wen Ning’s shoulders. Wen Ning dropped his head against Mingjue’s own broad one.

They sat in a companionable silence.

“I’d like to go back for a bit,” Wen Ning admitted. “I’d like to visit the Nightless City. And the Burial Mounds. I went once before with Sizhui, but I think I would like to go back again”

Mingjue couldn’t understand his fellow fierce corpse’s wish, but he could understand the ache of needing to make things right. Get closure.

He knew he still had to face Xichen and reassure his sworn brother that he was not to blame.

If anything, Nie Mingjue had a hand in his own death, as much as that admission made him uncomfortable. But being undead gave him a startling clarity.

Maybe if things had been different; if he hadn’t been so harsh on Guangyao, if he had actually tried to listen to his youngest sworn brother and tried to help rather than condemn, maybe this all could have been avoided.

As much as it pained him to admit his own wrongdoings, he knew he couldn’t blame Guangyao for everything.

Sure, the chopping him up was rather uncalled for and currently very inconvenient, but the evidence of an approaching qi deviation had been there long before Guangyao first played his twisted melody. It would’ve just been a matter of time.

He might not be able to go back in time and fix things, but he could help the not so fierce corpse that had become close to him in such a short time.

“Stay here,” Mingjue got to his feet. Wen Ning looked up at him curiously but nodded.

It didn’t take Mingjue long to acquire what he needed. He ran into Song Lan along the way and explained to the third member of their unconventional dead family what he was doing and Song Lan decided to go with him.

Apparently the healing process for his friends was coming along well, but he wasn’t allowed in the room.

The pair made their way back to the clearing where, predictably, the too obedient undead was still sitting on the rock.

Pitch black eyes trained on the objects in Mingjue’s hand.

“Are those incense sticks?” Wen Ning asked curiously.

“For you,” he thrust them out, “for your sister”

If corpses could cry, he’s pretty sure Wen Ning would be bawling based on the air around him.

“Really?” he reached out almost hesitantly, as if afraid to touch. Impatient, Mingjue pressed the incense sticks into Wen Ning’s hands.

We can leave you if you wish. Song Lan wrote.

“I,” Wen Ning suddenly looked shy and again, Mingjue was struck by how ridiculously young he was. Far too young to have died so brutally that it would leave enough resentful energy to turn him into such a powerful undead. “I would like you to stay?” he cocked his head to the side. “I want. I want jie to know I’m not alone.” he looked at the ground “...that I have friends now,” he said quietly.

Mingjue had the inexplicable and overwhelming urge to ruffle Wen Ning’s hair and pull the shorter male into a tight hug like he used to give Huaisang when they were younger.

Based on the softness to the edges of Song Lan’s mouth, the other corpse was feeling the same way.

So after they had lit the incense sticks and said prayers to Wen Ning’s sister and the rest of his deceased family, that was exactly what Nie Mingjue did.

Wen Ning squeaked in surprise as Mingjue enveloped him in his arms.

He also grabbed the collar of Song Lan’s robes and forcefully pulled him into his embrace so the two smaller corpses were smushed next to each other in the circle of Mingjue’s arms.

Wen Ning seemed to bask in the hug, but Song Lan looked mildly uncomfortable at that much contact.

Mingjue suspected the Taoist priest’s aversion to touch had something to do with his fastidiousness and dislike of dirt.

Soon enough, Song Lan extricated himself from the embrace but ruffled Wen Ning’s hair instead.

Mingjue kept an arm around the smallest corpse and Wen Ning didn’t seem in any hurry to pull away.

That was when he was suddenly struck with a thought.

What if this was a chance.

His first brotherhood ended with him and the youngest killing each other and their middle brother in seclusion.

Maybe, just maybe, this was an opportunity to try again.

He could protect these ones.

Chapter 11

Song Lan was nervous.

Master Wei had told him that the healing process for a shattered soul was going to be long and arduous. And that was if they even wanted to come back.

He had been able to form new bodies for them, some kind of sun dew plant he had learned about during his travels.

Song Lan hoped it would work. He hoped A-Qing and Xiao Xingchen would be able to come back.

That they would want to.

He didn't know what he would do if he were to lose them for good.

Song Lan's undead companions stuck with him and kept his mind off of things. He was grateful for this strange bond that had formed between them.

He was grateful for Wen Ning's sweetness and sensitivity and ability to know when Song Lan was bothered. He found the Ghost General's tendency to state the obvious endearing. He could even deal with his terrible sense of humor.

He enjoyed Nie Mingjue's dry sense of humor, no-nonsense attitude and ability to face things head-on (or off). He could do without the physical contact, but that seemed part and parcel of the former sect leader.

(Song Lan had a brief moment of horror at the fact he just made a pun. Wen Ning was wearing off on him)

He was allowed into the room where the souls of his other companions were healing for two hours every day. Too much exposure to his fierce corpse resentful energy, Wei Wuxian had said, could compromise the procedure.

He wished he could talk to them. Tell them how much he wished they would come back. That he was waiting.

These visits either left him with hope or exhausted. No matter what, one or both of his undead companions would be waiting for him.

One would think that fierce corpses couldn't do much. They didn't have qi to mediate, they didn't really need to train, they didn't need to eat and couldn't get drunk.

Instead, they sat in the rabbit field.

Nie Mingjue would tell them battle stories and what it was like growing up in a sect praised for their battle prowess.

Wen Ning would hesitantly talk about his life, alternately cutting himself off or abruptly changing the subject when it became something sad. The amount of times he did that made Song Lan think he experienced far too much sadness in his short life and an equal amount of tragic misfortune in his unlife.

Song Lan again wished he was able to communicate easier than writing.

The rabbits still did not like Nie Mingjue. Either that, or they thought he was particularly tasty because they nipped at him quite frequently. They adored Wen Ning and tolerated Song Lan.

The days passed peaceful and uneventful and it was actually something of a nice pace.

It was one such day that Wen Ning posed an interesting suggestion.

“Song-daozhang,” he began in his slow, thoughtful way, “have you ever heard of finger spelling?”

Song Lan shook his head.

Wen Ning’s stiff fingers moved slowly into several hand motions that vaguely resembled actions and Chinese characters.

“It’s a way of communicating with people who are unable to hear,” he said, “I had a cousin who suffered deafness and my family learned finger spelling to communicate with her. It might be faster than writing, if you are interested in learning it”

Song Lan considered it for a brief moment before nodding.

“Can you teach me too?” Nie Mingjue interjected. Wen Ning nodded.

“And when your friends recover I can teach them too,” Song Lan noticed Wen Ning’s use of the word “when” instead of “if” and smiled slightly.

He didn’t know what to think about Wen Ning’s offer and Nie Mingjue’s request.

He was...happy.

Happy that he had found people who understood him and were willing to go so far as to learn and teach a new method of communication for him. Happy that he wasn’t spending his unlife alone. Happy that there was the possibility that Xingchen and A-Qing could be brought back.

“We can start with the basics,” Wen Ning said, holding up his hands.

They sat in the clearing for several hours, until the sky began to get dark. They had made significant progress. They could now communicate in basic sentences and spell out words they hadn’t learned yet.

It was indeed easier, despite the fact the stiffness of their dead flesh made the finer movements slightly more difficult to form. And Song Lan was grateful he wouldn’t have to

drag out a notepad any time he wanted to talk to his undead friends.

And Wen Ning was a good teacher. He had endless patience and didn't mind going over the same word several times, pausing to correct the finger placement and hand shape in his companions' stiff extremities.

Nie Mingjue showed a surprising knack for it and when they had given him looks of amazement, he had shrugged best he could and explained it was very similar to hand signals used during night hunts.

That gave Wen Ning the idea to figure out how to incorporate common night hunting hand motions to try and make their method of communication easier to be understood by others.

Song Lan found himself repeatedly touched and amazed by the capacity for caring that the Ghost General demonstrated.

It also made him mourn for everything the younger corpse had been through.

If there was ever anyone who suffered a fate they did not deserve, it was Wen Ning.

Nie Mingjue's efforts to learn a new form of communication had surprised Song Lan. The Taoist priest had thought the former sect leader far too unyielding to bother.

"By the time your friends wake up," Nie Mingjue clapped him hard on the shoulder, "you'll be able to teach them this language yourself!"

Song Lan glanced between his companions.

Their calm certainty that Xingchen and A-Qing would recover bolstered Song Lan's spirit. He knew he tended to be more pessimistic than most, but just maybe things would be alright.

Chapter 12

For the first time in a long time Wen Ning was genuinely happy.

Sure, he had moments of happiness; seeing A-Yuan all grown up and happy, being able to see Wei-gongzi and Second Master Lan get married, finally being accepted by Jin Ling despite being the reason his parents were dead. But the last time he could remember being genuinely happy while being undead was at the Burial Mounds with his family. When he was alive, he was pretty sure the last time he had been consistently happy instead of just moments of happy was when his parents were alive.

But now, he was happy.

He wasn't alone.

He had been mostly content before. But existing as a fierce corpse was a painfully solitary experience. Even with Wei-gongzi and A-Yuan and his friends, he was still alone. They were alive, they couldn't relate.

Then Nie Mingjue had crashed his way through the pervasive loneliness and Song Zichen followed, carefully avoiding the rubble.

It felt almost like having family again.

Nie Mingjue's tough love, the way he would ruffle his hair or cuff him over the head for doing something particularly airheaded reminded him of his sister.

Song Zichen's stern but gentle chiding and obvious disapproval and concern whenever Wen Ning put himself in danger reminded him of Uncle Four.

They were both picking up finger spelling rather quickly. It was fairly impressive, in Wen Ning's opinion.

But he could tell they were both preoccupied.

When not with Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue, Song Zichen spent his time hovering outside the room his other companions were healing.

Nie Mingjue lurked somewhere within the Cloud Recesses, almost stalking the sect leader in his seclusion.

Wen Ning couldn't quite understand why Nie Mingjue didn't just talk to Lan Xichen. It seemed rather uncharacteristic for a man who usually just confronted things head on.

He wasn't sure how to help his friends.

They were sitting in the rabbit field, just Wen Ning and Song Zichen.

Chifeng-zun had been pulled aside by Wei-gongzi to experiment with a better method of keeping his bits attached to his bobs.

“How’s the healing for your friends coming along?” Wen Ning was shredding the grass and making a small pile on top of the rabbit sleeping in his lap.

It’s slow. Zichen spelled out, handing more grass to Wen Ning, who added it to the steadily growing pile on the furry lump. *I wish I could talk to them. Maybe that would help.*

“I could talk to them for you,” Wen Ning said, the idea hitting him like lightning. “You could tell me what you want me to say and I could say it”

He could sense the air of surprise around the Taoist priest.

Really?

“Yeah,” Wen Ning forced his facial muscles to move in a smile. “Let’s go!”

“With the both of you, you can only be in for an hour,” Wei-gongzi warned when they approached him with their request. “The resentful energy from two fierce corpses is a lot”

“Thank you, Wei-gongzi,” Wen Ning bowed. “I won’t be in there long”

He followed Zichen into the room.

Two bodies were lying on tables, covered in a white cloth and talismans. Spirit trapping pouches were sitting between the bodies surrounded by more talismans.

“Hello,” Wen Ning began cautiously, watching as Song Zichen wrote. This was a bit complicated for finger spelling. “You don’t know me, but my name is Wen Ning. I’m, I’m friends with Song Zichen. He can’t talk but he wishes he could,” Wen Ning glanced at the paper that Song-daozhang finished writing on. “He wants to tell you how much he misses you and that Xue Yang is dead. He wants me to tell you he doesn’t blame you and he’s not mad either, he never was. He knows how much pain you must have been in, but he just wants you to come back. He’s traveled far to find a way and he hopes he can be reunited with you. He misses you. He misses you both so much. Please come back”

Silence fills the room. Wen Ning didn’t expect anything else.

“Song-daozhang,” Wen Ning looked at him, “I can come with you again, if you wish?”

Zichen nodded.

Wen Ning left the recovery room, leaving Zichen behind.

“Wen Ning, can I talk to you?”

Wen Ning tilted his head as Wei Wuxian approached him.

“I’m glad you’ve made friends,” Wei Wuxian smiled, but it was sad. “I know I’ve been...somewhat negligent of you as of late”

“Wei-gongzi-”

“Mm,” Wei Wuxian held up a hand, “let me finish,” Wen Ning nodded. “You deserved so much better than everything that happened to you. Both in life and in death. I’ve found a way to...” Wei Wuxian furrowed his brow and took a breath, “well, a way to release you from your body. You would die a final time and your soul would join the cycle of reincarnation. If you want...”

Wen Ning wasn’t sure he was hearing right.

“Of course, you don’t have to decide now,” Wei Wuxian said quickly, holding up his hands. “Or even ever. But the option is there”

“Thank you, Wei-gongzi,” Wen Ning moved to bow.

Wei Wuxian stopped him.

“Aiya, A-Ning! You do everything I tell you except stop treating me like your master! You’re my friend, A-Ning. You always have been and you always will be,” he brushed a strand of hair out of Wen Ning’s hair. “Say it; you are my friend”

“You are my friend,” Wen Ning said, amusement curling dully in his empty chest cavern.

“Say I am your friend”

“I am your friend”

“Now say I will stop calling you Wei-gongzi”

A flicker of mischief joined the amusement and Wen Ning bowed his head.

“I will not stop calling you Wei-gongzi”

“A-Ning!”

“Wei-gongzi”

Wei Wuxian pulled back, intense fondness glittering in his grey eyes before he pulled Wen Ning into a hug.

His new body is much shorter than his old one. Before, he had been taller than Wen Ning and now he was shorter.

Wen Ning returned the hug slightly awkwardly, careful not to accidentally crush Wei Wuxian. He didn’t always know his own strength.

“Isn’t this adorable,” a rumbling voice said in amusement.

They looked up to see Nie Mingjue standing a few feet away. He was trying to smile, but the dead muscles wouldn't cooperate and just gave him a terrifying grimace.

"Song Lan in with his friends?" he jabbed his thumb to the door of the recovery room.

"Yup!" Wei Wuxian rocked on his feet, "A-Ning here talked to their spirits for Song Zichen"

Nie Mingjue let out a "huh" sound.

"Now if only you could talk to Xichen for me," he said. Wen Ning knew he was only half joking.

"I could help you too," Wen Ning blinked at the larger corpse, who's brows drew together on his forehead. "I think you should talk to him"

"I don't even know what I would say"

Wen Ning cocked his head to the side.

"Maybe you don't have to say anything," Wen Ning said softly, thinking about his family. "Maybe even just seeing him, or having him see you would be enough. Or maybe you'll know what to say when you need to"

Wei Wuxian looked thoughtfully at Wen Ning before glancing at Nie Mingjue.

"Chifeng-zun," he said, "I think it would be good for both you and Xichen-gege. At least try. He's been very sad. It's worrying Lan Zhan"

Nie Mingjue made a sound that would have been a sigh if he had lungs that required air.

Wen Ning carefully wrapped his hand around Nie Mingjue's wrist and tugged him in the direction of the Hanshi.

The larger corpse hesitated, but allowed his smaller companion to pull him along.

Wen Ning reached the door. He felt irrationally nervous. He didn't know why he was the one feeling nervous. Probably because he still didn't feel entirely welcome in the Cloud Recesses, and now he was about to make his presence known to the sect leader.

He glanced back at Nie Mingjue and determination flickered through him. He steeled his nerves before knocking on the door.

"Sect Leader Lan?"

Silence.

"Sect Leader Lan. It's. Um. It's Wen Ning, I. There's someone who wants to speak to you but is too worried about what you'll think"

Nie Mingjue's expression was annoyed.

“You didn’t have to tell him that!”

“Da-ge?” a startled voice came from inside. “Is that you?”

Wen Ning glanced at his friend, who looked like he was about to run away.

The door opened and Lan Xichen’s head popped out. His face was gaunt and almost as pale as Wen Ning’s own.

With a gentle push to Nie Mingjue, Wen Ning left to give them privacy.

Wandering back to beneath his tree he laid down in the dirt like he used to.

This time, he was content.

He was able to help his friends, even just a little bit.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

My angst never comes out angsty 🙄

Nie Mingjue awkwardly sat in front of his remaining sworn brother.

He had had to resist the urge to shout in dismay at his appearance.

Xichen looked terrible; his normally flawless skin was paper white and dry, making the dark circles beneath his eyes stand out. He was too thin, his white robes hanging off his frame.

“Da-ge...I don’t...how?”

“Wei Wuxian brought my consciousness back like he did with Wen Ning”

“Ah,” Xichen’s dark eyes studied him. “How do you feel about that?”

“Truthfully?” Nie Mingjue shrugged stiffly, “it’s not so bad anymore. At first it sucked. But you get used to it. Although the fact my limbs won’t stay in place is a problem”

“Your...what?”

To demonstrate, Nie Mingjue tugged off his arm and tossed it onto the table with a plop.

Xichen’s eyes widened and he looked somewhat horrified.

“Wen Ning is usually pretty good at reattaching them,” he trapped his arm against the table, preventing it from wandering off to go fight something. “It’s just obnoxious. Although Wei Wuxian is trying to come up with a more permanent way of attaching them”

“...I see,” Xichen blinked. “That would indeed be a little inconvenient”

“It’s worse when I lose my head”

The sound Xichen made was akin to a wounded animal.

“Your...head?”

“Yeah. I’d show you that too, but that’s even more annoying than an arm”

“I’m...I’m good,” Xichen looked vaguely ill. “The arm is plenty”

Mingjue nodded, satisfied.

“Xichen,” he studied his erstwhile sworn brother, “forgive me, but you look awful”

Xichen gave him a tight smile.

“Yes, well. Given everything that happened...” he trailed off, looking like he was about to cry.

Mingjue couldn’t take it anymore, he launched forward and wrapped his remaining arm around Xichen’s body, pulling his er-di against him.

Like this, he could feel how thin Xichen actually was.

The arm he was holding was trapped against the now-frail back. The hand awkwardly patted Xichen on the shoulder as Xichen broke down crying.

If he had been alive, Mingjue’s heart would be breaking.

He held Xichen tightly as his er-di cried on his shoulder. He was privately grateful he didn’t smell like a rotting corpse (although he wasn’t sure why that was).

“I’m so sorry, da-ge,” Xichen finally croaked out once the tears slowed to a stop. “I should have done better...been better”

Mingjue held Xichen tighter.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said firmly.

“I should have seen A-Yao’s ambitions. I shouldn’t have tried to force the two of you to swear brotherhood. There’s so much...”

“You couldn’t have guessed what would happen,” Mingjue said, “I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. And being dead has made me realize a lot of things. Er-di. There’s a lot I could have done differently too. I never should have sworn brotherhood with Meng Yao, knowing how much I distrusted him. Honestly? We should have parted ways completely after the Sunshot Campaign. But you, er-di, you have nothing to feel guilty over”

Xichen looked at him with watery brown eyes, his ever-present smile nowhere to be seen. Mingjue was never great at cheering people up, but he knew he had to try.

“On the bright side,” Mingjue tried to smile. “I’m feeling more clear-headed now than I was when I was alive”

Xichen’s doe-brown eyes were soft.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“You don’t have to be,” Mingjue said, pulling him into another hug. This time, Xichen returned the embrace.

He knew they had a lot to unpack. A lot to talk about. A lot to deal with. It wouldn’t be easy, but they had time. They could fix this.

“You wouldn’t be able to help me reattach my arm?” Mingjue held it up with a stiff grin. Xichen let out a watery laugh.

“Sure, da-ge”

They would be alright, Mingjue decided as Xichen got up to retrieve spirit-binding thread.

They would be alright.

Chapter 14

Song Lan was a little concerned about his fellow fierce corpse.

Wen Ning had been strangely distant lately, almost as though he would get lost in thought.

After leaving the slowly mending bodies of Xiao Xingchen and A-Qing, he decided to track down the fierce corpse in question.

Wei Wuxian said that it seemed like their spirits were getting stronger and he had been optimistic that they would return.

A-Qing's in particular was almost ready to go back into the new body.

The first place he checked was the back of the mountain, where the rabbits were kept. It was the most likely place to find Wen Ning.

Except he wasn't there.

Song Lan went to go check the Hanshi, where Wen Ning had taken to staking out in an attempt to convince Nie Mingjue to speak to his erstwhile sworn brother.

No Wen Ning.

Now Song Lan was getting a bit worried. It wasn't like the smallest of their trio to go missing like that. Wen Ning was usually terribly predictable.

He thought back to when he had first encountered Wen Ning. The fierce corpse had been lying under a tree. Song Lan quickly headed in the direction he remembered.

Sure enough, Wen Ning was lying beneath the same tree. Song Lan felt a brief flicker of *deja vu* and reflected on how far they had come since that day.

Song Lan had not expected to find friends like Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue. Their unique situations bonding them in a way that no one else could ever understand.

He stepped on a twig to let Wen Ning know of his presence. The not so fierce corpse sat up.

"Daozhang," Wen Ning said, "hello"

Song Lan waved.

Can I join you? he signed. Wen Ning nodded. Song Lan gingerly sat down on the grass, avoiding the patches of dirt.

Wen Ning looked at him and Song Lan felt a rush of affection for the silly corpse; his long hair was tangled with dirt and debris clinging stubbornly to the strands. Wen Ning was absolutely horrible at taking care of himself.

Are you alright? Song Lan signed. *You've been distant lately.*

Wen Ning stared at him, unblinking before looking away.

"I didn't think anyone would notice," Wen Ning admitted. Song Lan felt the familiar ache he got whenever Wen Ning said things like that. "Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning began slowly, "he found a way to release my soul from my body..." blunt fingers scraped clumsily at the grass.

Is that something you would want? Song Lan signed.

"I don't know," Wen Ning looked up at the sky, "not too long ago, I would have said yes. But now...now I don't know"

Do you have to decide right away? Song Lan signed. He wasn't sure what the feeling in his chest was at the thought of Wen Ning no longer being around, but he didn't like it.

He could understand if Wen Ning wanted to be freed, the gods know that he's suffered enough for several lifetimes.

Song Lan hoped that Wen Ning's suffering will be worth it in his next life.

"No," Wen Ning shook his head stiffly. "Wei-gongzi said it was just in case"

You'll know when you're ready. Song Lan told him. *The fact you're having doubts makes me think you're not quite there yet.*

Wen Ning looked up and nodded.

"I think you're right," his features did their best approximation of relieved.

"And we'd support you either way," Mingjue's deep rumble reaches their ears.

The former Nie sect leader dropped down heavily next to Wen Ning, slinging an arm over his shoulder.

"How did your talk with Sect Leader Lan go?" Wen Ning asked, looking up at the larger fierce corpse.

"I think it went well!" Nie Mingjue tried to smile, but it came out as an vaguely terrifying grimace. "It's not perfect, but we'll get there"

Song Lan nodded. He hoped that Xingchen and A-Qing would be the same.

"Your hair is a mess," Nie Mingjue shoved Wen Ning's head down. "How does it get in this state?"

"Um. I'm not sure?" Wen Ning moved to look up at Mingjue, who roughly turned his head.

"Stay still while I sort this out"

Song Lan watched the pair with amusement.

He would understand if Wen Ning wanted to be released, but he was secretly glad that he had decided to stay.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Enough schmoop. Back to our regularly scheduled shenanigans.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“A beast?” Nie Mingjue crossed his arms.

The trio of corpses had been summoned by Wei-gongzi and Second Master Lan.

“Yes,” Wei-gongzi twirled his flute. “Unfortunately, this creature has been too difficult for the cultivators of Xinyi Zhang Sect. As a sect under the protection of Gusu Lan, it’s our responsibility to help. Sizhui and Jingyi will go with you as representatives”

“A fight is just what I need,” Chifeng-zun’s grin was mildly terrifying, “I was beginning to get bored”

Wen Ning exchanged a glance with Song-daozhang.

Last time they had gone on an excursion, it had ended up with them walking Nie Mingjue’s headless body back home like a dog.

Wei-gongzi, however, looked confident in his assessment of them being the best corpses for the job.

Well, in all fairness, they were probably the only corpses for the job.

The trip to Xinyi was fairly quick, it was a smaller town not far from Caiyi. They met the Zhang Sect disciples at the edge of a deserted dock.

They were greeted by a cluster of eight disciples, all of whom looked far too young to be fighting a monster that Wei-gongzi had said was dangerous.

“Thank you for coming so quickly esteemed cultivators and, erm...guests?” the eldest stepped forward and bowed, she glanced at the fierce corpses with a slightly skeptical and wary expression. “My name is Wan Li”

A-Yuan smiled calmly.

“Thank you,” he replied, “my name is Lan Sizhui. This is Lan Jingyi. Our companions are Song Zichen, Nie Mingjue, and Wen Ning”

A murmur went up from the cluster at the names.

“Th-the Ghost General!” one of the smaller disciples shrieked.

Several others crowded around her, huddling away from Wen Ning and staring at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“No one has ever survived an encounter with him!” one of the other disciples said in a not-so-hushed whisper.

The reaction was nothing new for him, but it always hurt when it happened. He shifted, trying to hide behind Nie Mingjue’s bulk.

The former sect leader was having none of that, apparently. Because he picked him up by the back of his robes, holding him in the air like a mother cat holding her kitten by the scruff of his neck, and set him front and center.

“You need to be more confident,” Nie Mingjue said. “So what if they’re afraid of you?”

“I don’t like people being afraid of me,” Wen Ning confessed, staring at the ground. Song-daozhang patted him on the shoulder.

“You’re a fierce corpse. They’re going to be afraid of you one way or the other,” Nie Mingjue said, “you wanna change their view on you? Do something about it”

Wen Ning tilted his head, confused as to what the former sect leader said.

He turned to the cluster of disciples.

“Hello,” he bowed, “my name is Wen Ning”

Several of them let out shrieks as they scrambled away.

Well, that didn’t work.

The senior disciple sighed and shook her head. Her smile spoke of all the pain and exasperation of a long-suffering older sibling.

“I apologize for my shimei. She can be a bit...hysterical sometimes,” Wan Li bowed.

“It’s fine,” Wen Ning said resignedly, moving to hide behind Nie Mingjue again.

This time it was Song-daozhang who pulled him out of his hiding spot. Wen Ning sent him a pleading look only to be met with an unimpressed flat stare.

No hiding. the Taoist priest signed.

“Anyway, it first showed up in this part of the lake,” she gestured to the water. “It’s been really bad for the town, because this is where all our goods are shipped to and from. Several of our senior disciples went after it, but they were all killed almost right away”

“I see,” A-Yuan frowned. “What is this creature?”

“See for yourself,” she said with a sigh.

Disciple Wan sent out a talisman. It exploded over the water, sending sparks down.

Nothing happened for several minutes and Wen Ning wondered if it was even awake when the water began to swirl and an eerie shriek split the air as something large and pale stretched up from the depths.

It really was pretty gruesome, Wen Ning decided.

The creature was whiter than jade, with a long, skinny torso and stringy black hair, reminiscent of seaweed. It’s perfectly circular head was featureless save for a thin line bisecting what Wen Ning assumed was it’s face. Several arms with thin, spindly fingers tipped with sharp nails shot out from its back and the thin line opened into a gaping, toothless grin.

One arm came right for the trio of corpses and Song-daozhang slashed it off with a sword. It flopped onto the dock and Wen Ning was reminded of Nie Mingjue’s arm.

It turned in their direction and another arm shot out.

Wen Ning dodged and Nie Mingjue ripped the arm off with his bare hands.

“It doesn’t have eyes!” Chifeng-zun complained, “how the fuck can it see us?”

Sonar? Song-daozhang signed. *Maybe it senses us?*

“Either way!” the former sect leader shouts, “it’s going down!”

We can’t even reach it. Daozhang told them. *It’s in the middle of the lake. We can’t swim, we sink.*

Wen Ning had an idea. With a heavy thrust, he wrapped one chain around the water beast’s neck, looped his arms around a tree and sent the other chain out parallel to the first.

“Chifeng-zun!” Wen Ning called, “Song-daozhang! I made you a bridge!”

The former sect leader didn’t even question it, he jumped onto Wen Ning’s shoulders and ran down the chains.

With a roar, he jumped on the beast and began ripping it apart with his bare hands.

Song-daozhang had two swords drawn as he followed Nie Mingjue.

Suddenly, a scream split the air.

“A-di!”

Wen Ning saw one of the arms headed for a younger disciple and moved on instinct, using his chains to swing him right in front of the kid.

The hand went straight through his stomach with a soft, vaguely squishy crunch.

“Run!” he shouted at the disciple, who was staring in shock at the head-sized hole in Wen Ning’s abdomen. He had the ridiculous thought that he could probably use it as storage before wrapping his chain around the hand and ripping it off the beast.

Between him, Song-daozhang, and Chifeng-zun, they were able to dispatch the beast with slightly more effort than they had hoped it would take.

Wen Ning had just been flung bodily through the air as the dying scream of the beast reverberated in his bones.

He landed in a clump of flowers, one particularly bright clump of pink flowers poked almost perfectly through the hole in his stomach.

Huh. Maybe he could grow plants in it instead.

He managed to sit up, dislodging all flora from his orifices, both old and new, when a soft voice reached his ear.

“Um...Ghost General, sir?”

Wen Ning looked up.

It was the disciple from earlier. The one who had shrieked. She was standing a few feet away, looking nervous.

Wen Ning instinctively hid his midsection, briefly wondering if he could disguise it using the flowers from earlier. He knew from what people said that seeing a walking, talking being with a giant hole in it could be rather unnerving.

“Th-thank you for saving my brother,” she bowed, “and I’m sorry for how I acted earlier. We’ve only ever heard the stories”

Wen Ning looked at his hands.

“It’s okay,” he told her, “I’m used to it”

Something complicated crossed her features and she held out a small pouch. “For you,” she said. Wen Ning hesitantly reached for it, cradling it in his hands.

“Thank you,” Wen Ning bowed. She smiled at him.

“The stories were all wrong, weren’t they?”

“I don’t know,” Wen Ning answered truthfully, “but...I don’t eat people, if that helps?”

She giggled, the last of the tension easing from her posture.

“Thank you for everything!” she waved as she ran to join the other disciples.

“Thank you Ghost General!” the cluster of disciples chorused, bowing in Wen Ning’s direction. Wen Ning returned the bow and watched them hurry off.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder and he turned to see Nie Mingjue. The former sect leader was holding onto his left arm, the hand of which was the one on Wen Ning’s shoulder.

“What did I tell you?” he said, gesturing with the appendage, “you changed their view on you”

Wen Ning forced his facial muscles into a smile.

Suddenly, Nie Mingjue’s arm made a sudden bid for freedom. The former sect leader flailed with it, but it ended up dropping over the side of the dock and landing in the lake with a splash.

Nie Mingjue and Wen Ning watched it sink down into the water.

“Well fuck,” Chifeng-zun said succinctly. Wen Ning agreed as he jumped in after the wayward limb.

...

Wei Wuxian stared in amused disbelief as the bedraggled trio of corpses he had come to view as his sect returned.

Wen Ning would obviously be the head disciple. The head disciple who was currently sporting a bushel of pink flowers in his midsection.

”A-Ning,” Wei Wuxian waved him over. “Getting into gardening?” he gestured to the flowers.

”Oh!” Wen Ning blinked. “I figured the flowers were less gross than me walking around with a hole in my stomach”

Wei Wuxian sighed.

”A-Ning, we’ve been over this. You really need to stop getting holes punched into you”

”Sorry”

Wei Wuxian smiled, thoroughly amused.

”Come on, let’s get you fixed up and these in the ground where they belong”

Wen Ning nodded, following obediently behind him.

Well, if there’s one thing to be said about his sect, it’s never a dull moment.

Fun fact: I had a nightmare about the creature I described after watching Gonjiam: Haunted Asylum (9/10 would recommend), Classroom 6 (4/10 would recommend only if you're bored) and Paranormal Activity (8/10 would recommend) back to back.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Song Lan was on his way to visit Xiao Xingchen and A-Qing when Wei Wuxian came barreling towards him.

The more Song Lan got to know the man, the more he figured out the man was as chaotic as he was brilliant, and that Lan Wangji let him get away with pretty much everything.

“Good!” Wei Wuxian said breathlessly, “I was looking for you!” Song Lan tilted his head. “Your A-Qing is waking up!”

If Song Lan was alive, his legs would give out from beneath him at the relief he felt. Fortunately, he stayed upright and composed as he quickly followed Wei Wuxian.

They reached the room that the bodies were being kept in when they heard a crash.

Song Lan threw open the door and was greeted with A-Qing wobbling off the table her new body had been lying on.

She looked exactly the same.

“Where is that bastard!” A-Qing shrieked, “I’m going to kill him! See how he likes have his eyes and tongue removed! XUE YANG YOU LITTLE FUCKER!”

Song Lan winced. He had forgotten what a mouth she had on her.

A-Qing whirled around to point at him. Color drained from her face before relief filled her cloudy eyes.

“Song-daozhang!” she shrieked, launching herself at him, “you’re okay!”

Song Lan caught A-Qing and hugged her close.

She was sniffing as she curled her hands into his robes. He buried his fingers in her messy hair, wishing he could say something, but settling for hugging her tighter. He couldn’t even say he cared about the fact she was getting snot all over him. She was alive. It had worked.

“Whoa!” Wei Wuxian rushed over to Xiao Xingchen. “I think he’s waking up too!”

Song Lan sent silent prayers to whatever gods were listening. Prayers that Xingchen really would wake up.

A-Qing looked up and her eyes widened. She dashed her sleeves across her face and rushed to Xingchen’s body.

Song Lan didn't dare go any closer. He couldn't. His body was frozen.

He was suddenly swept with doubts. Would Xingchen want to see him? After everything...

A slender hand twitched slightly.

He hadn't been able to stop Xingchen from committing suicide. Hadn't been able to tell him that Song Lan didn't blame him.

What if Xingchen blamed himself?

What if he saw Song Lan as a fierce corpse and thought it was his fault?

What if-?

His thoughts screeched to a halt as Xiao Xingchen slowly sat up.

Dark eyes fixed on Song Lan.

Eyes that Xingchen had once given up for him.

He was grateful he was dead because otherwise the emotions flickering through him would be painfully overwhelming.

He was so unprepared for this.

Xingchen opened his mouth and Song Lan's body moved on its own.

He bolted from the room.

"Song Lan!" a voice shouted after him.

"Daozhang?" Wen Ning's soft, startled voice reached his ears, but he kept running.

Song Lan ran until he came back to his senses. He was in the rabbit field.

The rabbits recognized the quiet corpse and barely twitched in acknowledgement, a few friendlier rabbits hopped over to him.

Song Lan collapsed onto the grass, for once uncaring about the possibility that he could be lying in rabbit excrement.

Once he came back to his senses, Song Lan groaned.

Why had he run away?

He had spent years carrying Xingchen's soul fragments with him, wishing to see him again. Now, his deepest desire had come true and he had ruined it.

Like he ruined everything.

Maybe Xiao Xingchen was better off without Song Lan in his life. He'd only ever brought the other man pain and suffering.

He couldn't even be bothered at the fact that several rabbits decided the unmoving fierce corpse made a nice platform to sit on.

Song Lan was unsure how long he had laid in the clearing when he heard heavy, familiar footsteps.

"Are you okay?" Wen Ning's soft voice reached his ears.

Song Lan waved his hand weakly.

"What happened?" Wen Ning settled next to him, beginning the task of de-rabbiting Song Lan.

Xingchen woke up.

"Weren't you hoping for that?" the youngest fierce corpse tilted his head and Song Lan was again struck by the contrast of the delicate features on a fierce corpse.

I panicked.

Wen Ning patted his shoulder sympathetically.

"I do that a lot," he said mildly, helping Song Lan sit up. "Why did you panic?"

Song Lan hesitated.

What if he hates me? What if he thinks it's my fault that everything happened? I don't think I could live with that...

Wen Ning gave him a look.

"Good thing you're not alive then," he said mildly. Song Lan shoved him, a raspy laugh leaving his mouth. Wen Ning had the worst sense of humor, but for some reason it cheered him up a bit. He knew the fierce corpse in front of him wouldn't ever judge him.

I loved him. Song Lan signed weakly. Wen Ning nodded.

"Do you still?"

Song Lan nodded. Wen Ning rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Give him a chance to talk to you. Think about how much happier Chifeng-zun was after talking to Zewu-jun!"

Wen Ning had a good point.

"Is this about the other dao Zhang?" Nie Mingjue's booming voice echoed across the clearing and the pair looked up. "The one who just woke up?"

Song Lan nodded as Nie Mingjue walked over. The bunnies scattered at his approach.

He dropped down heavily and raised an eyebrow at them.

“You ran off”

Song Lan nodded reluctantly. Nie Mingjue sighed and clapped him on the shoulder hard enough to push him into the ground.

“I understand,” he said, “facing Xichen was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. But it was worth it. It wasn’t as bad as I was expecting”

Song Lan looked at him. It was true. Nie Mingjue had been through the same thing. Song Lan glanced between them and smiled softly.

What if he hates me?

“You spent years carrying around his soul,” Nie Mingjue said with a raspy sound, “if he hates you even after everything, he doesn’t deserve you or your love. But I don’t think he will. He killed himself when he discovered he killed you. He gave you his eyes. What part of any of that says he hates you?”

Nie Mingjue had a point.

Song Lan looked at his hands.

You’re right. I’ll talk to him.

“If you need an interpreter...” Wen Ning said softly, “I’ll help”

“Me too,” Nie Mingjue said with one of his grin-grimaces.

Song Lan smiled at his friends.

The peaceful moment was interrupted by Nie Mingjue swearing as his leg fell off. The bunny that had been nibbling at the binding thread popped up enthusiastically before taking off.

The disembodied leg took off at a surprisingly rapid hop.

“Come back here!” Nie Mingjue roared as the corpses scrambled to their feet and started chasing it.

Chapter End Notes

Somehow this became songxiao by accident 🙄

Chapter 17

“Ah! Fuck! Wen Ning! It’s behind the tree!”

“Why is it so fast??”

The trio were chasing a disembodied leg through the back mountain of the Cloud Recesses.

It’s a leg, it shouldn’t be this difficult! Song Lan signed quickly as he lunged for it.

The leg cheerfully hopped away from Song Lan, veering away from Wen Ning and bouncing through the trees.

Nie Mingjue crashed through the bushes. Song Lan followed.

Wen Ning burst out of the trees, his hair was in disarray with leaves and twigs clinging to the dry strands.

Somehow Wen Ning always ended up the messiest of the three of them and he didn’t understand why that was.

It made sense that Song-daozhang wouldn’t be particularly messy. He had a naturally fastidious nature and hated germs. But Chifeng-zun was the aggressive one who was always tearing things apart and throwing himself into things.

Yet Wen Ning always ended up the messiest.

He dodged a branch before tripping over a rock, face-planting into the grass. He lifted his head and spit out the grass in his mouth as the leg hopped almost mockingly a few feet away.

Nie Mingjue burst out a few seconds later jumped at it but, in a display of skill that a disembodied limb really should not possess, it skipped - hopped? - happily through the trees.

“The fuck,” the former Nie Sect Leader swore, hopping after it.

Wen Ning was actually rather impressed the older man was able to move on just one leg.

Until a few minutes later, Chifeng-zun wobbled and crashed into a bush.

A blur of black passed Wen Ning as Song Zichen gave chase.

Wen Ning scrambled to his feet and joined in.

After several minutes of running in circles, Wen Ning spotted the leg heading for the barrier of the Cloud Recesses. Maybe the barrier would stop it!

He stumbled out of the treeline and drew up short at the figure in grey robes standing a few feet away. Nie Mingjue’s uncooperative limb wriggling in his hands as he stared at it in

confusion.

Wen Ning recognized him as Song Zichen's friend. Xiao Xingchen.

Wen Ning stilled, uncertain what to do.

"Hello," he said softly. "You're Song-daozhang's friend"

"I am"

"Fuck I lost it!" Nie Mingjue's voice echoed loudly. "Shit, Song Lan be careful!"

Wen Ning turned to look, only to find himself flat on the ground with Nie Mingjue and Song Zichen pinning him.

"What do you mean?" Chifeng-zun growled, "you crashed into me!"

"Um...guys...?"

I did not! Song Zichen signed *you tripped and crashed into me!*

"Who was the one who tripped on his own feet?"

"Guys..." Wen Ning tried again.

You're the one with one leg. Song Zichen signed back.

"Guys!"

"What?" *What?*

Wen Ning wordlessly pointed to Xiao Xingchen, who was watching the scene with a dazed and dumbstruck expression on his face.

Even Chifeng-zun's leg was no longer moving.

He felt Song-daozhang stiffen.

"My leg!" Nie Mingjue rolled off and struggled to his foot. "Thanks," he hopped forward and accepted his leg back, "you're Zichen's friend, right?"

"I am," Xiao Xingchen said faintly, eyes not leaving Song Zichen's form still pinning Wen Ning to the ground.

Wen Ning gently rolled his friend off of him and stood up.

"You don't hate him, right?" Nie Mingjue asked with his characteristic bluntness. Xiao Xingchen looked startled.

"Of course not," he said softly, "I could never"

“Good,” Mingjue clapped him on the shoulder and tucked his leg beneath his arm. “Come on Wen Ning, let’s let these two talk. I need help reattaching this anyways”

Wen Ning gently nudged Song-daozhang forward.

Song Zichen sent him a look that Wen Ning had learned meant he was going to panic.

“You can do it,” he whispered encouragingly. “You’ve been waiting for this”

Song Zichen curled his hands closed, clearly avoiding Xiao Xingchen’s gaze.

“Zichen...?” the soft voice traveled and Song-daozhang flinched.

Nie Mingjue didn’t hesitate to hoist Wen Ning under the arm not holding his disembodied leg and take off running into the trees.

Wen Ning hoped the pair could sort things out.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

guess who's back, back again...

But in all seriousness, I cannot leave this one unfinished. I just can't. It's by far one of my most favorite works and I finally shook loose the writer's block with, you guessed it, ships.

Normally I'm not a NieLan shipper. I always
he Xichen as being aroace. But for the purposes of this story, I'll try. SongXiao is one of my OTPs and I'm sorry, you cannot tell me two men who wanted to form a sect together were not just two gays who wanted to adopt a billion children and teach them cultivation. Their whole storyline feels like the gay xianxia equivalent of uhaul lesbians. As for Wen Ning...his ship will either be an interesting left field one or pretty obvious for anyone who has read anything else by me 🧠 I have yet to decide lmao. Ofc the main focus will still be on the shenanigans of our favorite dead disaster trio... But there's only so much "dismembered limbs" and "lost wen nings" that can be done before it gets old, which means that the dead disaster trio now has something new and shiny to make a mess out of. namely getting in the way of each other's ships and generally making a mess out of personal lives, both their own and each other's.

Anyways, I **will** finish this story. Eventually. It's hard when there's really no plot except "let's put three fierce corpses and their one(1) braincell into as many weird situations as possible"

Song Lan mentally cursed Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue for abandoning him to his fate.

He was about to turn and flee when he felt a gentle, dull pressure on his arm.

He turned and looked at Xiao Xingchen. His dark gaze tracked across the familiar handsome face and he felt an ache in his long-dead heart. He never thought he would see the man he had given his heart to so long ago.

"Song Lan," Xingchen said softly. "You look..."

Dead. Song Lan signed using common night hunting terms. Xingchen looked slightly confused and sheepish.

"Well, yes. But..." Xingchen's gaze was soft, "oh Song Lan, I've missed you," he reached out and Song Lan retreated instinctively.

I don't want you dirtying your hands on someone like me, Song Lan signed. Xingchen's eyes widened in confusion and Song Lan forgot that Xingchen can't understand.

He wished someone between him, Nie Mingjue and Wen Ning had had the foresight to stay behind so Song Lan could actually communicate with Xiao Xingchen.

If he were alive, Song Lan would probably be panicking. As it was, he was not not panicking, his panic was just at a dull buzz.

“Daozhang!” Song Lan felt an impact against his side and he looked down. “Daozhang! Why did you run away!?” A-Qing's small fists pummeled his side with dull thuds.

“A-Qing, please,” Xingchen reached out to pull her back. He glanced up at Song Lan. “Song Lan...I just, I wanted to say so-”

Song Lan gestured negatively with enough force that if he had been Nie Mingjue, his head would have popped off and gone rolling away.

He almost wished something like that would happen so he didn't have to face this awkward conversation without the actual ability to converse.

So Song Lan did the only thing he knew he could do without absolutely screwing things up, and gods knew every time Xiao Xingchen was involved Song Lan screwed up...he ran.

He was halfway through the forest when there was a rustling above.

Suddenly, like an overgrown bat, Wen Ning appeared upside down in front of him.

“How did it go?” Wen Ning asked as though dangling upside down from a tree branch was an everyday occurrence.

Why are you in the tree? Song Lan signed, ignoring the question.

Wen Ning blinked and looked at the ground as a sudden series of cracking sounds came from above them.

“Aw shit!”

Song Lan stepped back as leaves and branches and one very heavy Nie Mingjue came falling down in front of him.

“I told you putting me in a tree was a bad idea!” Nie Mingjue gripped from a very deep Chifeng-zun shaped hole in the ground. The disgruntled corpse clambered awkwardly out.

Surprisingly all his limbs were intact. Huh.

“How did it go?” Mingjue asked. Song Lan knew he couldn't avoid it twice.

Would've gone better if I could have actually communicated with him.

Wen Ning's mouth opened in surprise.

"Ah we didn't think about that, did we?" the youngest of the trio said slightly sheepishly, still hanging upside down.

"So what did you do?" Nie Mingjue asked.

I ran away.

Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue exchanged exasperated glances.

"Song Lan!"

Song Lan froze at the hand around his wrist. Wen Ning fell from the tree. Nie Mingjue backed up awkwardly.

"Song Lan! Stop running from me, please!" Xiao Xingchen said, tone desperate and hurt.

Wen Ning glanced at Song Lan.

Do you want me to stay? Wen Ning signed. Song Lan nodded. Nie Mingjue glanced between them with an air of relief.

"I'm gonna go then," the former sect leader said with barely concealed desperation. Song Lan knew the oldest of their trio didn't exactly like interpersonal conversations like this. He'd much rather solve his problems with fists rather than emotional conversation.

Wen Ning was better equipped. Surprisingly, considering how timid he usually was.

Song Lan glanced at the youngest with equal desperation and Wen Ning sighed. He stepped forward and bowed.

"Daozhang, this one is Wen Ning"

"The Ghost General?" Xingchen asked in surprise. Song Lan noticed Wen Ning's barely concealed flinch at the term but he nodded.

"Song-daozhang wasn't sure how to communicate with you"

Xingchen turned dark eyes on Song Lan. The urge to flee made itself known again but Wen Ning's hand on his wrist stopped him.

"He has carried your soul for many years, seeking ways to bring you and A-Qing back. He feels guilty for what happened"

"No," Xingchen shook his head, looking horrified, "he has no reason to feel guilty!"

I made you leave. Song Lan signed urgently. *I was so blinded by anger and pain that the things I said...I never should have let you go.*

Wen Ning put Song Lan's finger spelling into words. Xiao Xingchen looked upset.

“No, it wasn’t your fault. I left because I couldn’t bear to watch you hurting because of me. If only I hadn’t been so forgiving, Xue Yang would have been dead and none of this would have happened”

You only did what you believed was right. There is nothing to feel guilty about.

“I killed you!”

You didn’t know. You gave me your eyes...

“In Baixue Temple, those things you said, you were right,” the wetness gathering at the corners of Xingchen’s eyes hurt Song Lan in a way nothing else ever had and he found himself shaking his head, stepping forward and wrapping his arms tightly around Xingchen’s soft frame. Xingchen returned the embrace, clinging to Song Lan’s taller, broader frame.

I’ve missed you he wrote against Xingchen’s back.

“I’ve missed you too,” Xingchen replied quietly against his shoulder.

Song Lan never wanted this moment to end. Even though his ability to feel things fully was hindered by the fact his nerves were dead, he could still feel the weight of Xingchen against him. If he could cry, he probably would be crying.

For a split second he was about to tell Xingchen that he loved him...

...but the moment was broken by a rustling behind them.

“So they basically played eyeball ping pong until they died,” Nie Mingjue’s voice reached them. Wen Ning made a raspy wheezing sound as he tried to shush the loud corpse.

“They wouldn’t have had to if not for that rat bastard Xue Yang!” A-Qing’s voice joined in, “if he wasn’t already dead I would track him down, rip out his own eyes and shove them so far up his asshole he would be seeing the fucking candy he ate for dinner!”

“I like this one,” Nie Mingjue rumbled.

Song Lan turned, only to see Nie Mingjue grab A-Qing and yank her behind the tree where they had probably been spying from this whole time. Wen Ning was doing a terrible job of trying to look innocent. Song Lan was grateful for the interruption though, he was about to do something monumentally stupid.

You can tell them to come out he signed.

“I-who...?” Wen Ning looked at him with soft doe-eyes and if Song Lan couldn’t see the expanse of Mingjue’s shoulders from behind the tree, he would almost believe him. At a stern look, the youngest relented almost guiltily. “He knows you’re there”

A-Qing bolted out and body slammed directly into Song Lan. “You’re not allowed to die again okay?” she said, clinging to his robes.

“No chance of that happening,” Nie Mingjue said picking leaves out of Wen Ning’s hair from his tree excursion. “Man, you guys should hear about some of the things we’ve fought! I remember one time Song Lan had-” Nie Mingjue fell silent as Wen Ning nudged him sharply.

Please don’t scare them Song Lan signed, amused.

“Sorry”

“What is that?” Xingchen asked from the circle of Song Lan’s arms. “That you do with your hands. It looks a bit like nonverbal night hunting commands”

“Finger spelling!” Wen Ning said, “so we can talk to Song-daozhang without needing a notepad. Would you like us to teach you?”

Xiao Xingchen looked up at Song Lan’s face. If it were possible, Song Lan would be blushing several shades of red at the open affection in his warm dark eyes.

“You don’t even have to ask,” he said. Song Lan instinctively held him closer.

A strange feeling of completeness washed over him. Between Nie Mingjue and Wen Ning’s friendship, dare he say brotherhood, to the fact the two people he loved more than anything were back in his life and he had the capability to protect them in ways he didn’t before, this was the happiest Song Lan could ever remember being.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

double update because the gusu rabbits in my brain managed to shit out more than one

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nie Mingjue left the Hanshi feeling strangely light. His talks with Xichen have been going well. Xichen had even broken his seclusion at Mingjue's urging, and had rejoined the land of the living.

And mostly living.

He still wasn't entirely sure how to classify Song Lan's...friend? Cultivation partner? Sworn brother? and the girl with a mouth that would make even the most battle hardened Nie Sect member blush.

He quite liked her and had decided to try and train her in sword fighting. Maybe get her a saber. He could see her with a saber.

These thoughts circled in his head and ventured to the part of his brain he very carefully kept roped off.

He had started off in Qinghe. After being brought back as a sentient fierce corpse his first course of action was to track down his little brother and give him a good talking to.

He had heard the rumors that his didi was responsible for everything leading up to Guangyao's downfall.

The sneaky underhandedness that tainted the whole thing, from supposedly convincing the Mo boy to kill himself to getting Xichen to stab Guangyao, would have enraged an alive Nie Mingjue.

But being dead has a way of clearing one's mind and giving them a different perspective.

On the one hand he was disappointed in Huaisang, that his baby brother would be so deceitful and downright callous. He had always known Huaisang's penchant for being more manipulative than Mingjue ever would be, but he had only ever used his manipulation tactics to wheedle his way out of doing things he didn't want to do, or convincing shop owners to give things to him as "gifts".

On the other hand he was incredibly impressed, and a little touched, by the clear effort his brother had devoted to getting revenge on Mingjue's killer. He had always known his brother

was smart, far smarter than Mingjue and, given the outcome of everything, even smarter than Jin Guangyao who Mingjue himself had recognized as being a rare genius.

His brother hadn't been able to give him any solid explanations aside from repeated "I don't know", so Mingjue was still at something of a loss as to how much of a role his baby brother had played.

He also felt guilty for their last interaction before his death. Despite it being influenced by his qi deviation, the fact the last memory he had left Huaisang with was him destroying Huaisang's precious things and then slashing at him with his sword, well, Mingjue didn't think he would ever forgive himself.

So maybe his guilt had led him to be a bit more lenient with Huaisang over the whole "resurrect the dead Yiling Patriarch by manipulating a troubled boy and lead the entire cultivation world on a long and very dangerous drawn-out journey to discover the Jin Sect's treachery and expose Jin Guangyao's crimes only to have his remaining sworn brother stab him while the dead sworn brother was running around trying to kill everything in yellow" than he would normally have been. Oh, and the cat killing. He was shocked his nature loving little brother would have found the cat killing acceptable.

Why hadn't Huaisang just left a note or something?

If anything, he was mostly angry at Huaisang's role in shattering Lan Xichen. But honestly, no one was blameless there, Mingjue included. If he had made the effort to actually listen to Guangyao and understand where he was coming from like Xichen always insisted he try, or had parted ways with him after the Fire Palace, things would be very different.

It had also become apparent that Huaisang had hoped Mingjue being back in Qinghe meant him resuming Sect Leader duties, despite Mingjue's insistence that a fierce corpse was Not going to be sect leader.

It didn't help that in his absence the Nie Sect was no longer the same. Whereas the Nie Sect was once known for their blunt honesty and dislike of underhanded tactics, Huaisang's sneaky methods became par for the course. Despite this, the loyalty of the sect members to each other was quite possibly stronger than under Mingjue's reign. It was an odd dichotomy: the loyalty and morals of the Nie Sect conflagrating with Huaisang's penchant and knack for subterfuge had slowly and quietly turned the Nie Sect reputation from a battle sect to an espionage sect.

Nie Mingjue couldn't say he liked the change, but he would be lying if he said he wasn't proud of his little brother for stepping up and successfully running the sect. It had also become apparent that his brother no longer pushed saber cultivation for those who feared qi deviation, Huaisang himself relied on weaponized fans that were shockingly deadly.

Hence why Mingjue had eventually left Qinghe.

He was glad he did, because he had met Wen Ning and Song Lan. He had managed to bring some life back to Xichen, which he found ironic considering how very UNalive he currently was.

Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen Wen Ning since he translated for Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen.

That was both usual and unusual.

The youngest of their trio had a habit of slipping off. How a fierce corpse had learned to be so quiet and stealthy, Mingjue would never know. Even in his life, stealth had never been one of his strong points.

But despite slipping off, Wen Ning was usually easily found. He wasn't anywhere that Mingjue would normally be able to find him.

So he went to ask the one person who always seemed to know where the fierce corpses went.

Sometimes Mingjue wondered if this meant Wei Wuxian was their sect leader. Something about having a sect leader instead of being one felt relieving to Nie Mingjue. He could just focus on fighting rather than politicking and pretending to like people when all he wanted to do was smash their face through the wall lest he start an all-out war between sects.

Being undead was actually pretty nice in that respect.

"Ah?" Wei Wuxian blinked when he asked about where Wen Ning was. "Oh! I think he went with the juniors!" he grinned. "Last I knew they were headed toward Yunmeng"

"Yunmeng?" Mingjue would frown if he could. He knew the Jiang Sect Leader had hated Wen Ning. They had apparently come to blows many times.

Granted, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin seemed to have patched up their relationship from what Wen Ning had said, but Wen Ning carefully avoided the Cloud Recesses whenever Jiang Wanyin was visiting either with or without Jin Ling.

Knowing this, and knowing the penchant for being stupidly submissive and obedient that the youngest corpse possessed, Nie Mingjue started towards Yunmeng with one goal in mind: protect Wen Ning from Jiang Wanyin.

Where are you going? Song Lan signed as he passed.

"Yunmeng. Going to get Wen Ning before the Jiang Sect Leader does"

Song Lan widened his eyes with effort. He also knew there was some kind of unspoken tension whenever their youngest spoke about Jiang Wanyin. *I will go with you.*

"You sure you wanna leave your...?" Nie Mingjue gestured vaguely. Song Lan raised an eyebrow as if to ask *what?* "Hey, you haven't even told him how you feel," Mingjue would shrug if he weren't afraid of losing an arm, "I dunno what to call you"

Like you've told Sect Leader Lan how you feel? Song Lan signed, falling into step with Mingjue.

Or, he would have had Mingjue not stumbled into a tree at Song Lan's comment.

“I’m not-we’re not-it’s not like that!” Mingjue sputtered, “we’re just friends!”

Song Lan raised an eyebrow in disbelief and why was it so damn easy for him to do that? Mingjue couldn’t even get his face muscles to smile in a way that didn’t scare off rabbits and Wen Ning.

Though, according to both his brother and Xichen, that wasn’t much different from when he was alive.

Regardless, Xingchen will be busy for a few days. Besides, we have communication talismans that work off my resentful energy

“Wei Wuxian creation?” Mingjue asked. Song Lan inclined his head as they began their trek to Yunmeng. Mingjue couldn’t resist poking at Song Lan at least once. “Wanna at least say goodbye to your *most intimate partner in cultivation*?” he said, trying one of his terrifying grins.

And yeah, he totally deserved to have Song Lan detach his arms and hold them hostage for half the trip.

It was so worth it though.

Chapter End Notes

Will there be Mingjue teaching A-Qing how to wield a saber and expanding her vocabulary (or her expanding his 🧠)?

You bet there will be.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wen Ning was laying beneath his tree.

It had been awhile since he laid beneath his tree. He hadn't felt the need to. But lately the feeling of being left behind was beginning to creep up on him.

Song Zichen had his two most important people back with him. Nie Mingjue had patched things up with Xichen and had apparently sorted out things with his brother prior to them even meeting.

What did Wen Ning have?

His family, sans A-Yuan, was all dead. Anyone he had cared about aside from A-Yuan and Wei Wuxian, was also long dead. He had a decade of missing time.

The tides of time were passing and Wen Ning felt like he was being left behind. Stagnating. Nothing changing from before Master Wei's resurrection.

Granted, he was chronologically the oldest fierce corpse. It would stand to reason nothing much in his unlife would have changed.

But where did that leave him?

"Ning-ge! Ning-ge where are you?"

Wen Ning sat up at A-Yuan's voice. Getting to his feet, he shoved his melancholy in a box in the back of his mind and went to go greet his cousin.

"Ning-ge," A-Yuan's face lit up, "Jingyi and I were wondering if you wanted to come night hunting with us. I know you've been busy lately..." he trailed off, a brief expression of hurt flickering across his face before being hidden behind a smile.

Wen Ning felt guilty. Had he been neglecting his only living relative?

"Of course I would," he smiled the best he could. The happiness on A-Yuan's face was worth it.

"We're going to be hunting near Yunmeng," A-Yuan said as they made their way to the entrance to the Cloud Recesses. "We'll be meeting up with Jin Ling and Ouyang Zizhen"

Yunmeng.

Jiang Sect.

Jiang Wanyin.

He was pulled from his thoughts by an excited sound. Lan Jingyi was in front of him, pumping his fist in the air.

“Aw yeah! We’ve missed you Senior Wen!” Jingyi grinned and Wen Ning felt guilty again.

Maybe Wen Ning needed to get lessons in time management. But he wouldn’t know who to ask. Master Wei was absolutely out of the question.

He pondered that thought as he followed the pair towards Yunmeng.

His thoughts eventually returned to contemplating Jiang Wanyin. Of course, they had to return when the subject of his thoughts was currently walking next to him looking resplendent in purple robes with the moonlight casting shadows against his sharply handsome countenance.

He wouldn’t know how to classify his relationship with Sect Leader Jiang Wanyin.

It started as a tentative truce. Frequently drawn into each other’s orbits by their shared responsibility over the four ducklings they watched.

What had started off as mutual avoidance had eventually turned into some kind of strange tension, like a guqin string stretched taut and ready to snap.

But it wasn’t an angry guqin string even though Wen Ning couldn’t figure out what exactly the tension was.

Once he had been able to get past Jiang Wanyin’s bark, he found that abrasive, foul-tempered man to have a dry and rather sarcastic sense of humor that matched well with Wen Ning’s own dry and generally ill-timed one.

After Jiang Wanyin had barked out a laugh over Wen Ning’s deadpan crack about being an actual (dead) meat shield, their relationship(?) had loosened to a mutual banter that frequently ended with Jiang Wanyin’s increasingly creative threats about what exactly he would do to Wen Ning if he didn’t stop with those godsforsaken puns.

That escalated to Jiang Wanyin blurting out he trusted Wen Ning to have his back which lead to Wen Ning taking a tentacle through the chest for him which lead to an irate Wanyin stitching him up and snapping out a “call me Wanyin, you lumbering oaf” with red dusting his cheeks.

That had stretched the guqin string.

He suspected Jiang Wanyin felt the odd tension too.

He was a little distracted by the way the moonlight highlighted Jiang Wanyin’s sharp features that he didn’t see the vine.

“Whoa-oof”

“What the fuck”

Wen Ning lifted his head and peered down at Jiang Wanyin who was glaring up at him.

“Sorry,” Wen Ning said, eyes widening as he realized the positions they were in; Jiang Wanyin trapped beneath him, hands fisted in the sides of his robes.

He blinked at the Jiang Sect leader. The Jiang Sect leader blinked back and oh wow that jawline.

Strikingly violet-silver eyes darken slightly and again there’s the odd guqin tension between them that Wen Ning couldn’t quite place...

But it was broken by the crackling of bushes and Wen Ning being lifted to his feet like a kitten being scruffed by it’s mother.

There you are! Song Zichen signed.

“You went off without us!” Nie Mingjue complained, still holding a dangling Wen Ning under the arms. Song Zichen nodded.

Sect Leader Jiang looked like he was about to pop a blood vessel.

“Sorry,” Wen Ning bowed in apology once he’s placed on his feet.

“Why are you apologizing!?” Jiang Wanyin huffs, clearly irritated, “are you not allowed to do things on your own? Do they not know you can handle yourself?”

The sharp glances of Song Zichen and Nie Mingjue made Jiang Wanyin straighten and narrow his eyes.

“We can’t let Wen Ning go off alone!” Nie Mingjue said incredulously, “gods only know what he would trip over, fall on or into, or get lured away by promises of a kitten and a hug!”

Nie Mingjue had a point on that last one, but what Wen Ning gathered from his statement...

“You guys were worried about me?” Wen Ning asked, feeling something warm curl in his chest. If he could cry, he would. Nobody except his sister and Master Wei had worried about him, and a lot of that worry had disappeared when Wen Ning became a fierce corpse.

Jiang Wanyin looked incredulous. “Does not one of you realize how absurdly codependent this is?” he ran his hand down his face, “Wen Ning has been doing just fine on his own long before either of you two came into his life!”

Considering “on his own” had led to not only the annihilation of his family and Jiang Wanyin’s, but the capture and loss of his autonomy under Jin Guangshan and going back further his capture and death at the hands of the Jin, maybe “just fine” and “on his own” were mutually exclusive.

“I beg to differ,” Wen Ning raised his hand, “technically being on my own is what led to me getting killed in the first place”

Silence fell over the other three. Jiang Wanyin looked conflicted, Nie Mingjue looked guilty, Song Lan looked confused.

“Um, excuse me?” the moment was broken and the four men turned to look at the four juniors peeking through the trees. “There’s something up ahead and it’s...rather large,” A-Yuan frowned slightly.

“I told you I could take it!” Jin Ling shouted, “nothing is too large for me!”

“Notwhatyousaidlastnight,” Jingyi mumbled. If it weren’t for Wen Ning’s undead superhuman hearing he would have completely missed the reason A-Yuan turned red and Jin Ling screeched. Ouyang Zizhen lightly whacked Jingyi over the back of the head.

“Then are we going to bring up what you said when me and Sizhui-” Jingyi squawked and flailed, chasing the green-clad junior in an attempt to shut him up.

Wen Ning’s dead grey matter spun with the unwanted revelation of the junior’s apparently romantic polycule.

“You good?” Nie Mingjue asked, resting a meaty hand on Wen Ning’s shoulder. “I would say you’ve gone pale based on your expression, but there’s no possible way to go any paler...”

“Yup,” Wen Ning squeaked. “I’m great! Let’s go!” he turned and started walking in the direction of whatever had the polycule spooked.

“This way, dumbass,” Jiang Wanyin’s grip around his wrist was tight. Zidian sent sparks along his dead nerves and it felt vaguely like when Wen Ning would use himself as a lightning rod. He idly wondered what Zidian would feel like completely wrapped around him. He knew it’s happened before, but he wasn’t exactly in possession of his full consciousness at the times. “Maybe they are right and you do need supervision”

Wen Ning almost stumbled at the thought that zipped through his head.

Maybe you could be my supervision

Chapter End Notes

Chengning. Big surprise.

How clueless can our favorite codependent trio be?

I guess we’ll find out 🧠

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nie Mingjue watched Wen Ning trailing alongside Jiang Wanyin.

To be entirely fair, his memories of Jiang Wanyin were from nearly a decade ago at this point. The young sect heir who survived the utter annihilation of his sect and managed to rebuild from the ground up and was eventually saddled with half the responsibility of raising his nephew.

He had known Jiang Wanyin and Jin Guangyao weren't exactly the closest, but they had had many interactions regarding the well-being of Jin Ling. For all Guangyao's faults, he had been very conscientious of raising Jin Ling properly and teaching him how to handle sect business. Why this was the case, Mingjue never knew. It would've been easy for him to sabotage the young heir and maintain his control over the Jin Sect that way.

Maybe Jiang Wanyin had a hand in keeping that from happening. But from what he could remember, Guangyao had been fond of his nephew.

Now he had a new reason for Jiang Wanyin to be on his radar: Wen Ning.

He did not trust the way the Jiang Sect leader would look at Wen Ning. Watching him when he thought he wasn't looking, as though waiting for a moment of weakness, an opening he could use to attack. The thoughtful gaze he sent his way when Wen Ning wasn't paying attention.

I don't trust him Nie Mingjue signed to Song Lan. The Taoist priest blinked.

Why not?

Look at the way he watches him

Song Lan studied the two. Wen Ning was telling Jiang Wanyin something and the Sect Leader's gaze was intent on Wen Ning's hands as they fluttered through whatever he was talking about.

What do you mean?

He stares at Wen Ning intensely. Too intense. Like he's waiting for a chance to attack

Does he have issues with Wen Ning? Song Lan peered at them again. Wen Ning said something that earned a snort from Wanyin, lips tugging up in the corner.

Was he making fun of Wen Ning??

They were enemies once. Mingjue responded. *Wen Ning inadvertently killed his brother in law.* Song Lan's eyebrows did The Thing. *We need to keep Wen Ning safe from him.*

Agreed.

Content that his second youngest undead brother was on his side, Mingjue was able to focus on the hunt. It had been awhile since he'd been able to fight a good battle of any sort.

They reached the clearing where the juniors set about on alert.

Nie Mingjue decided to test the full capabilities of his undeadness. He tried to do the sensing thing that Wen Ning seemed capable of doing, but all that responded was two resentful energies and five regular energies.

He tried again and came up with a handful of smaller life forces, probably animals or something.

His third try sent a ping back that had him backing up slightly.

What is it? Song Lan signed sharply. Wen Ning glanced back at Mingjue's movement and frowned.

"I dunno," Mingjue said, "whatever it is, it's massive"

Wen Ning closed his eyes and he must have done the sensing thing too because he also backed up.

"What," Wanyin snapped, Mingjue bristled at the tone he used with Wen Ning. "What do you sense?"

"It's big...I don't think those four can handle it on their own"

How big? Song Lan signed. Mingjue wondered if Song Lan knew about their sensing ability.

"Bigger than that water creature," Wen Ning said, "the one that punched a hole in my stomach"

"Again!?" Jiang Wanyin asked incredulously. "Why are you always going around getting holes punched in you?" his eyes narrowed at the quirk of Wen Ning's lip, "if you crack a joke about being holy, I swear to every god out there that I will dismember you, tie each individual limb up with Zidian and sink you to the bottom of Lotus Pier!"

Nie Mingjue growled at the way Jiang Wanyin was threatening Wen Ning. Not to mention it also hit a little too close to home.

Much to his pleasure, Wanyin paled.

"Sorry, Chifeng-zun," he bowed, "I forgot"

Nie Mingjue was just about to respond when a roar shook the clearing. Jiang Wanyin seemed to instinctively reach for Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue lunged forward, scooping the youngest fierce corpse beneath his arm and running towards the roar.

He ignored Jiang Wanyin's startled expletives with a vicious glee.

Nobody messed with his youngest undead brother. Poor Wen Ning is too sweet and too naive. It's up to Nie Mingjue and Song Lan to keep him safe this time.

Chapter End Notes

I swear they get more ridiculous every chapter 😭
Will Song Lan be more reasonable than Nie Mingjue?
Maybe.
We'll see.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Song Lan kept an eye on Jiang Wanyin and Wen Ning.

He recalled what Nie Mingjue had said. That they used to be enemies.

Whatever they had going on, Song Lan wasn't sure he'd consider them enemies.

The eldest of them was pretty convinced the looks that Jiang Wanyin sent towards their youngest were negative in intent. Which made Song Lan wonder whether Nie Mingjue had had a lot of experience with romance before he died.

Not that Song Lan himself had much experience. He had pretty much been devoted exclusively to Xiao Xingchen from the day they met.

Also, the whole thing with germs and people and people germs had always rendered romance as something unappealing to him before he had met Xingchen.

He wouldn't have minded Xingchen's germs though.

He watched as Mingjue absconded with Wen Ning, laughing as he ran towards the resentful energy that Song Lan had been sensing since his arrival.

Song Lan approached the purple clad sect leader and rested a hand on his shoulder. Jiang Wanyin looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

This would be easier if he could explain using his words. But he can't and he doubts Jiang Wanyin knows finger spelling. He pointed to where Nie Mingjue and Wen Ning had disappeared before pointing to Jiang Wanyin and making a heart with his hands and cocking his head to the side.

He watched in amazement as Jiang Wanyin turned the same shade of purple as his robes.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he snapped. Song Lan raised an eyebrow. "I don't!"

Song Lan holds out his hand and Jiang Cheng hesitantly held out his hand.

Nie Mingjue thinks you want to hurt him he wrote on his palm.

Jiang Wanyin choked. "He-why!?"

Because you two don't like each other.

“That’s not true!” Jiang Wanyin snapped, “I like him!” his words seemed to register and he clamped his mouth shut. “Not the way you think!” he turned red. “Shut up okay!”

I haven’t said anything Song Lan wrote cheekily and Jiang Wanyin pulled his hand back, turned on his heel and stormed off after Mingjue and Wen Ning.

Song Lan watched him go with amusement. It made him happy, seeing someone look at Wen Ning like that. Their youngest companion had suffered much in his life and more in his death that he deserved to have something good in his life.

Song Lan had always had an uncanny ability to be able to tell a person’s true soul. It was why he had immediately been drawn to Xingchen and why just being around Xue Yang had made him uneasy.

Despite Jiang Wanyin’s unpleasant demeanor, Song Lan could tell he was not a bad person at his core. He would be a good match for Wen Ning.

Except he’d have to find a way to tell Wen Ning that.

He got the feeling Wen Ning didn’t realize.

Were they all a disaster?

Song Lan wouldn’t be particularly surprised if that was the case. Song Lan at least had admitted to his feelings towards Xingchen to himself. He had also decided that Xingchen deserved better than him and he would take his feelings to his grave.

Well. Figuratively at least.

He was just happy that he had Xingchen back. Even that had seemed like too much to hope for once. He was content to just be Xingchen’s friend and make up for everything he did.

He reached the clearing where the sounds of fighting were coming from. He stepped out of the treeline only to get a face full of some kind of sticky green goo.

“SORRY!” Nie Mingjue shouted.

Song Lan shuddered and made an uncharacteristically rude gesture in his direction.

See if he helped reattach limbs next time.

The group was battling a swarm of... Song Lan wasn’t sure what they were. They were almost like fierce corpses but it was as if someone had melted them into things only recognizable as once human based on their limbs. They had stringy lank patches of hair and were horribly uncoordinated; bumping into each other and flailing.

There were a ton of them.

He drew his sword and launched into the fray, doing his best to avoid any more globs of goo.

Nie Mingjue was having way too much fun. Song Lan knew he was teaching A-Qing how to fight. He allowed himself a moment of despair if this was how A-Qing was going to learn how to fight.

Their teenage compatriots were fighting in some kind of formation with an ease of movement and communication that made Song Lan wonder how often they fought together as a unit.

Lan Jingyi had always possessed above average flying skills and seemed to operate as a distraction and a lure; zipping in and out and twisting out of flailing limbs to draw creatures to where Lan Sizhui was stood on a tree, making use of his guqin. The yellow teenager, the young Jin Sect Leader, was perched on the branch next to him, facing the opposite way and firing arrow after arrow. Their fourth companion was on the ground beneath them, sword flashing smoothly as he made quick work of the creatures who made it past the guqin and the arrows.

If this was the skill of the next generation, Song Lan could rest easy that the world was in good hands.

Wen Ning was as usual, an absolute mess. Barely recognizable beneath the several layers of goo and detritus that stuck to the goo. He was standing back to back with Jiang Wanyin who had a whip that crackled with electricity.

Song Lan appreciated the aesthetic of the fact they both made use of ranged weapons. Yet another reason he decided they're compatible.

He dodged another glob of goo and shuddered as he spun his sword and impaled one of the shambling creatures. When he was traveling alone with Xingchen's and A-Qing's spirits he had never encountered creatures that were quite so...disgusting.

Why all of a sudden? he despaired.

"Song-daozhang!" Song Lan ducked as a creature flailed in his direction, smoothly slicing an arm(?) off and dodging the spurt of greyish-greenish goo.

It didn't take long for their group to finish off what felt like a never-ending stream of these weird corpse things.

Eventually the clearing was emptied and they congregated in the area with the least amount of corpse bodies.

Wen Ning frowned and knelt down next to one of the creatures.

Be careful! Song Lan signed as Wen Ning poked at the gaping chest wound.

"My medical knowledge is rusty," Wen Ning began, voice choked with something like horror, "but I remember this much..." he bent over the creature and looked closer, "I think...I think these were people," he looked up, horrified dark eyes the only visible thing underneath layers of mess. "As in living people"

Song Lan widened his eyes in horror. Mingjue looked grim. The teenagers looked varying levels of ill. Jiang Wanyin ran his hand down his hair and frowned.

“I heard rumors that entire villages near Yingchuan had been disappearing,” Jiang Wanyin frowned, looking troubled, “I dispatched disciples to investigate but they haven’t returned yet”

“How long ago was this?” Wen Ning asked, walking to another body and pushing it around. The corpse let out a gurgling sound.

“Watch out!” Jiang Wanyin threw himself at Wen Ning as the body exploded, covering them both in goo. “Ugh”

Song Lan watched, grateful he couldn’t be sick in his undead state as each body exploded into puddles of brackish goo. He dodged the one near his left foot but Nie Mingjue wasn’t so lucky and began cursing up a storm as his leg was splattered.

“Makes identification impossible,” Lan Sizhui said with a thoughtful frown.

Wen Ning peered up at Jiang Wanyin who was hovering above him, grimacing at his goo covering.

“Stinks so bad,” he choked. “How do you stand it?”

“I’m dead,” Wen Ning offered, “I can’t smell it”

“Lucky you,” Jiang Wanyin grouched, getting to his feet and holding his hand out to Wen Ning. Song Lan smiled indulgently. So maybe one of them was aware of their feelings at least.

The four hovering teenagers were staring at them gleefully. Song Lan was idly reminded of a cluster of groundhog babies he had seen peeking curiously up from a hole in the ground.

Xingchen had been fascinated by them but had scared them back into their hole. He had then convinced Song Lan to sit for hours in the hopes that they would come back.

The groundhog children broke into whispers, nudging and swatting each other before Lan Sizhui broke from the group and bowed.

“We would like to scout ahead”

Song Lan didn’t sense any resentful energy aside from him and his companions. Wen Ning tilted his head and Jiang Wanyin glanced at him receiving a subtle nod in return.

“Alright,” he said, “but be careful”

“Yes, of course,” Lan Sizhui bowed again before gesturing to his companions.

He suspected Wen Ning’s little nephew was the leader of the group. He was by far the most competent one so far. Song Lan only really knew him and Lan Jingyi. But the yellow one,

Sect Leader Jin seemed to be similar in personality to Jingyi and the fourth, Ouyang Zizhen seemed to be alright, if more on the quiet side. He quite liked that one.

He had heard from Wen Ning that they had nearly been victims of Xue Yang at Yi City.

Song Lan had been a little distracted at the time.

“So these were people?” Nie Mingjue asked, staring dubiously at a goo puddle.

“Keyword: were,” Wen Ning frowned. “Also, they didn’t sense as individual resentful energies...it was like they were one collective being of resentful energy”

What are you thinking? Song Lan signed.

“I’m thinking we need to ask Master Wei”

“Ugh,” Jiang Wanyin huffed and looked away.

Master Wei and him are brothers. Wen Ning signed. *Or, were. Trying to get back to that. They had a falling out. It was messy.*

Song Lan shook his head. First Wen Ning, now Wei Wuxian, was there anyone that Jiang Wanyin hadn’t been fighting with?

“I know you’re talking about me,” Jiang Wanyin said in irritation. “Also, it was more than messy. But we’re working on it, okay? And he’s still my brother. As much as I wish he wasn’t”

“You...know fingerspelling?” Wen Ning asked in disbelief. Jiang Wanyin cleared his throat and looked away.

“I had a disciple who had his eardrums blown out. I made learning it part of the curriculum. It’s useful to use during night hunts even aside from communicating with people who can’t hear...or speak”

Song Lan hid his grin behind his hand. Yes. He very much approved of Jiang Wanyin. He grimaced as he caught sight of the goo drying on his hand.

Can we please get cleaned up? he signed. *Wen Ning actually looks like one of the creatures*

They all looked at Wen Ning who blinked back.

“Well,” Nie Mingjue grinned, “I think this is progress!”

Progress?

“I managed to make it through a fight without losing a limb!” he curled his arms by his head.

“Ohhh,” Wen Ning grinned. “That’s good!”

Song Lan clapped without any enthusiasm.

Jiang Wanyin was looking like he was questioning everything in his life that led to this point.

Chapter End Notes

Bless Song Lan for being their braincell. Sort of. I like to think Wen Ning *has* a braincell but with Nie Mingjue he falls into the role of awestruck younger brother and basically just follows da-ge. Song Lan is (mostly) the better adjusted one of the group. Or at least is better at appearing to be better adjusted.

And oh look. Plot?

Idk. They wanted to solve a mystery so here we go I guess.

Save me. This thing is a beast. Already up to 30 chapters and now semi-plot.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wen Ning was bothered by his discovery.

He could tell based on the wounds that they had a trauma response to being stabbed or sliced. Which meant that the bodies were very much alive to have a trauma response.

Did they feel pain? Wen Ning didn't have much memory of pain. He still had vague sensations of pain but it was muffled pain at best, except when Mingjue punched a hole in him. That had hurt enough to take him down. His most recent memory of actual pain was having the skullpiercer nails driven into his skull. Any time he would try to disobey they would send pain shooting through his head.

Wen Ning had forgotten how nice it was to be dead and not really feel pain until then.

He hoped they didn't feel pain.

"You alright?" Jiang Wanyin asked.

Wen Ning glanced at him.

"Yeah, I was just thinking"

"About those things?" Wen Ning nodded, "I sent my disciples out two days ago," Jiang Wanyin furrowed his brows, "I'm not expecting them to be back so soon, but I don't know if I should worry"

"They could be two completely separate incidents," Wen Ning tried to reassure him.

Jiang Wanyin didn't look terribly convinced.

"You're a mess," he gingerly lifted up a chunk of hair. Wen Ning glanced at it. It was stuck together by the goo.

"So are you," Wen Ning reached out to wipe a spot of goo off Jiang Wanyin's cheek.

Pink flushed his face and Wen Ning decided he looked good like that. It made him look soft, like Wen Ning could hug him. He wondered if Jiang Wanyin gave good hugs. Nie Mingjue gave good hugs but Wen Ning was pretty sure they would have broken his ribs if he were alive. Song Zichen didn't usually want to touch anyone.

He caught sight of Song Zichen restraining Nie Mingjue in the distance and wondered what that was all about.

Oh, Song Zichen had taken his arms.

Jiang Wanyin turned to look.

“The three of you...” he shook his head. “Let’s go before your mute friend takes his legs too”

Wen Ning nodded, trailing behind Jiang Wanyin but his thoughts were on the strange corpse creatures.

What could be turning them into that? Or who?

He shuddered to think there was someone else like Xue Yang out there. Or worse, Wen Ruohan.

He remained lost in his thoughts, unaware of the concerned looks he was receiving from his fellow fierce corpses.

Song Zichen had forced him into the water and was currently working in tandem with Nie Mingjue to detangle and neaten Wen Ning’s hair. Wen Ning had gone docilely, lost in his thought.

But it was not going well.

“I can do it. Just worry about getting yourselves cleaned”

“No fucking way I won’t let-Song Lan why are you pulling me away!? Okay, I’ll go, just leave my arms alone-!”

Wen Ning only became aware of the change of person when the hands in his hair changed.

Jiang Wanyin’s hands were quick and skillful as they debrided Wen Ning’s hair and carefully worked through the knots.

“You’re almost as bad as Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Wanyin griped, “Yanli and I would spend hours detangling his hair only for him to go outside and all our hard work would be undone,” he worked another knot out, “mine isn’t much better though. Why do you think I keep it in a topknot instead of loose”

“My hair didn’t use to be bad,” Wen Ning responded. He caught sight of Song Zichen shoving Nie Mingjue under the water. “It only happened after I died”

“Probably hair oils,” Jiang Wanyin said. “You don’t have them anymore, so your hair is dry as fuck,” Wen Ning turned to look at him and he looked away, brows furrowing. “Yanli knew a lot about hair”

“My sister didn’t,” Wen Ning said, looking at the water, “that’s why my hair was short for a long time. Neither one of us knew how to do anything to it”

“You still don’t,” Jiang Wanyin snorted, “rinse your hair”

Wen Ning sank to the bottom of the lake. Except he wasn’t sure how long he needed to stay there.

It was actually kind of nice being underwater like that. He couldn't see much, but it was quiet and a bit lonely. Almost like he was the only one there.

He felt the water shift above him and decided to surface.

“-drowned him!” Nie Mingjue roared.

He's dead Song Zichen signed in exasperation *he can't drown*

“What happened?” Wen Ning asked. Nie Mingjue pulled him into one of his bone shattering hugs. Song Zichen shook his head. Jiang Wanyin looked exasperated.

They decided to return to Gusu to tell Wei Wuxian about what they had found. But before they left Wen Ning tugged Jiang Wanyin a little ways away, ignoring Nie Mingjue's glare.

“Thank you, Jiang Wanyin. And I'm sure your disciples will be fine. They were trained by you after all,” Wen Ning smiled.

A hand on his arm stopped him and he turned to look at Jiang Wanyin who looked slightly embarrassed, pink lightly flushing his cheeks.

“You can call me Jiang Cheng,” he said. “It's only fair. I call you Wen Ning”

Wen Ning stared for a moment before smiling. “Jiang Cheng,” he nodded. The pink darkened slightly and Wen Ning decided Jiang Wan-Cheng was handsome.

Unfortunately Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were somewhere exploring and Lan Xichen didn't know when they would be back so Wen Ning had to ponder the incident on his own.

He also had another thought to occupy his mind: Song Zichen.

The older fierce corpse very rarely left Xingchen's side, and vice versa. The girl, A-Qing, couldn't sit still long enough to pay attention to Wen Ning's lessons and frequently sought out Nie Mingjue who was teaching her how to fight with a saber.

Apparently she was quite good.

Xingchen had seemed mildly scandalized at A-Qing learning to fight, but Zichen reminded him that her knowing how to defend herself would be far better than if she didn't know how.

Xingchen devoted almost all his time to learning finger spelling from Wen Ning and Zichen and promised to teach A-Qing. Due to the technique used to bring his and A-Qing's souls back into bodies, their qi was unstable. It would remain unstable for a few weeks, maybe even months, so they needed to remain close to a cultivator who could steady it for them otherwise they would fade away, which meant they had to stay at the Cloud Recesses.

Wen Ning found himself quite liking Xingchen. The older male was a calming, gentle presence that resonated with Wen Ning. He could see why Zichen liked him so much.

As for Zichen, the blatantly obvious affection in his gaze as he watched Xiao Xingchen made the empty cavity in Wen Ning's chest ache for something he never knew nor had.

Even if there had been someone to watch him the way Song Zichen watched Xingchen, they were long dead. Like him. And not many people would look longingly or lovingly at a fierce corpse.

Except maybe Xingchen.

Wen Ning was not blind to the fact Xiao Xingchen stared at Song Lan as if it was the first and last time he was seeing him.

And, given the eyeball ping pong Nie Mingjue had mentioned, Wen Ning really couldn't blame them.

Although he did secretly wonder if it was weird to Xingchen to be staring into his own eyes. The concept of that surgery being a success was actually quite fascinating to Wen Ning. After all, he had helped his sister with the golden core transplant.

He shuddered at the memory of Master Wei's cries of pain, of Jiang Cheng breaking through the anesthesia with a weak "Wei Ying".

Those memories get quickly banished to the same box most of the memories of his life, death, and first few months after death get locked into regularly.

He turned his attention back to the two dao Zhangs who made googly eyes at each other when they thought the other wasn't looking nearly every five minutes.

It would be sweet, except for the fact neither one was aware of the other making googly eyes at them. So instead of being sweet, it was driving Wen Ning to the end of his very long rope.

"We need to find a way to get those two to confess their feelings to each other," he blurted out to Mingjue one day after watching as Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen made heart eyes at each other over the bunnies.

Nie Mingjue gave Wen Ning a look about as blank as Wen Ning felt. His romantic experience was woefully limited.

But he was good at research.

Which is how he found himself spending long nights in the Gusu library searching for anything that could help.

He could recall Qishan library, specifically Wen Chao's reserved section, would have exactly what he was looking for. Maybe in slightly more questionable format, but it might be enough.

Despite not having high expectations for the Lan Sect library, Wen Ning was proven decidedly wrong.

Who would've guessed the Lans were so hopelessly romantic?

From literature discussing ones “fated one” to books on how to woo them, Wen Ning had hit a veritable gold mine of information.

“Okay,” Wen Ning clapped his hands, Mingjue looked at him curiously from where he was staring blankly at a book. Wen Ning had roped him into helping with research despite the fact that Nie Mingjue looked like he’d rather be chasing a runaway limb. “Idea!”

“Hm?”

“We could set up a fancy dinner by the waterfall in the north!”

“Except Song Lan can’t eat”

Wen Ning felt disappointment wash over him.

“Right...”

Nie Mingjue peered over the book.

“For a sect that doesn’t even have decent food...why do most of these revolve around food?”

Wen Ning frowned.

“A romantic boat ride!” Wen Ning said excitedly a few minutes later. “Let’s find them a boat!”

“That...could work,” Mingjue said thoughtfully. Wen Ning grabbed a stack of papers and began to plan while Nie Mingjue made his escape from the library to go practice with A-Qing.

Unfortunately, Wen Ning hit a snag almost immediately. Boat rides required money and unfortunately none of the fierce corpses had money.

Why would they?

This was the thought he was pondering in the rabbit field when he caught sight of Nie Mingjue’s hulking form. Except he wasn’t alone. He had his hand wrapped around a bemused Lan Xichen’s wrist and was dragging him along.

“Ning-di!” he called. Wen Ning was still getting used to the newest form of address. It gave him conflicting feelings. He felt accepted and loved, but he was also scared that one day Nie Mingjue would realize he made a terrible little brother. Wen Qing would have been able to attest to that if she hadn’t died because of Wen Ning’s blunder with Jin Zixuan.

So he didn’t quite refer to Mingjue as ge yet.

“Hello,” Wen Ning greeted them. “Sect Leader Lan,” he bowed.

“Wen Qionglin,” Sect Leader Lan smiled. Wen Ning startled at the use of his long-forgotten courtesy name. “How are you doing?”

“I’m well, thank you,” he didn’t really know what to think about Sect Leader Lan. He glanced at Mingjue for help but his only response was an encouraging smile.

“Mingjue-ge says you’re doing research on one’s fated person,” Xichen smiled and wow he was pretty. “Did the library help you?”

“A little bit,” he responded, “but I’m still looking”

“Mm,” Xichen said, “there’s another, smaller library behind the Hanshi,” he held out a jade token, “if you use this you can enter. Maybe you could find what you’re looking for there?”

Wen Ning took the token like it was a priceless gem.

“Thank you Sect Leader!” Wen Ning said. His excitement renewed, he took off to visit the other library.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so sorry Song Lan...

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You’re right, da-ge,” Xichen said as they watched Wen Ning scamper off almost excitedly, “he is adorable”

“It’s nice to see him excited about something,” Mingjue rumbled. The only reason he was indulging Wen Ning in this odd whimsy of his was because he liked seeing the youngest finding something to passionately devote his time to. It was endearing listening to Wen Ning go on about romantic ways to woo one’s fated person.

It reminded him of listening to Huaisang chatter about birds and fans. Nie Mingjue knew absolutely nothing about any of these topics, but he liked seeing the people he cared about talk about things they cared about.

And he wasn’t exactly wrong. Watching Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen was painful enough to make Nie Mingjue wish his eyeballs had been removed instead.

Although he would imagine losing those would be even more inconvenient than losing his various limbs. So maybe it was a good thing Guanyao only turned him into a meat puzzle and didn’t decide to gouge out his eyes or tongue or...other bits.

“Hard to believe he’s the same person as the rumors about the Ghost General isn’t it,” Mingjue leaned back on his arms.

Lan Xichen looked pained. “Yet another thing to realize I was blind to”

“Hey, none of us would have ever guessed,” Mingjue said, though he would be lying if he said he didn’t know how Xichen felt. “It feels like a second chance. A chance to do better than I did last time”

Xichen smiled at him.

“They’re lucky to have you, da-ge. Especially Wen Ning. I know Wangji worries about him occasionally. Mostly because Wei Wuxian worries about him. I must confess, I feel like he doesn’t like me much”

“Nah, that’s just Wen Ning. He’s slow to warm up to people. Song Lan regularly despairs at the fact that Wen Ning still calls him Zichen. I can’t get him to call me da-ge either,” he huffed. “But I worry about him too,” Nie Mingjue frowned. “Especially with that Jiang Wanyin”

“Sect Leader Jiang?” Xichen widened his eyes, “why?”

“Song Lan said I was mistaken and Jiang Wanyin’s interest in him is romantic...but I was there. We both were. Wanyin hated him and Wei Wuxian”

“People change,” Xichen pointed out. “Hate doesn’t necessarily mean there’s no love. Jiang Wanyin obviously cared enough about Wen Ning to hate him. Would it really be a surprise that the line between them got blurred?”

Nie Mingjue thought back to his relationship with Jin Guangyao. He had once loved him, and then he had hated him, and then it had become a painful combination of both. Love and hate wrapped firmly around his heart and tangling between them both.

“I just don’t want to see Wen Ning get hurt,” Nie Mingjue frowned, “he’s already suffered enough. And I had a hand in part of it”

“None of it was your fault, da-ge,” Xichen sighed, “we were all misled”

“You think it’s possible Wanyin has romantic feelings for him?” Mingjue asked curiously. Xichen shrugged.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen them together. But Song-daozhang seems to, right?” Mingjue nodded and Xichen tilted his head. “Now that I think about it, at the temple...” he trailed off, “Sect Leader Jiang carried Wen Ning out of the temple after...” he glanced at Mingjue a little guiltily.

“After I put a hole in him,” he said with a frown. “You can say it. We’ve talked about it. Me and Wen Ning. He doesn’t have any hard feelings over it”

“I never know what to say anymore,” Xichen said, wilting like a flower left in the shade.

“Hey,” Mingjue gripped his chin and lifted his head up, “you weren’t at fault either”

They’ve talked about it at length and Xichen didn’t seem to hear Mingjue’s words when he tried to reassure him.

Oh well, Mingjue had a lot of time to convince Lan Xichen that none of it was his fault.

“If Jiang Wanyin did have romantic feelings for Wen Ning,” Xichen began carefully, “what would you think?”

Mingjue shrugged.

“As long as he didn’t hurt him, I would be happy for Wen Ning. He never had a chance to experience life before he was killed. If Jiang Wanyin is fine with it...” he shrugged. “It’s only my business insofar as making sure Wen Ning doesn’t get hurt”

“And the two dao Zhangs?”

“They were meant for each other,” Mingjue laughs, “if only Song Lan can pull his head out of his ass and realize that not only does Xingchen not blame him but stares at him just as much as he stares back, it would work. Wen Ning and I are actually trying to figure out how to get them to take the next step”

“What,” Xichen asked, bemused.

“Yeah. It’s not easy. That’s actually the research Wen Ning was doing. Everything we’ve read about courting involves food. We also thought we could put them on a romantic boat ride... but we realized we don’t have money”

“Oh!” Lan Xichen said, “if that’s all you need, I can give you some”

“Xichen, I couldn’t-”

“Let me help you,” he rested his hand on Mingjue’s shoulder and smiled softly. “Maybe they can have a happy ending”

Mingjue grinned and covered Xichen’s hand with his own.

“You have a kind heart, Xichen,” he said, earning a pink flush of his ears. “Have you ever thought about finding someone?”

A complicated expression crossed Xichen’s face.

“I don’t know,” Xichen said. “I don’t think so”

Mingjue felt a surge of relief at the fact Lan Xichen wasn’t interested in meeting anyone. He didn’t know what he would do if Lan Xichen suddenly introduced someone he was romantically interested in.

Of course he would try to be happy for his friend but the thought left an odd hollow feeling in his stomach.

He may have once had a chance. Maybe. But the whole being a fierce corpse thing was definitely a point not in his favor.

Imagine, someone like Lan Xichen, the graceful and elegant esteemed Zewu-jun courting a fierce corpse. Or being courted by one. Had he been alive, Nie Mingjue probably would have been the one to court Lan Xichen.

At one point he had even longed for a future for all three of them together. As much as he loved Lan Xichen, he also loved Meng Yao. He hated him because he loved him.

In another life, maybe that could happen.

But the best he could hope for now was that Lan Xichen would find happiness. Even if it wasn’t with him.

Wen Ning however, had been ecstatic at the fact they could put their boat plan into action and had promptly gone to invite the two dao Zhangs to the dock the following day.

Xiao Xingchen assured them they could leave for a little while. While Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were gone, the qi stabilization was actually being done by Lan Xichen himself.

It was even more adorable seeing Wen Ning getting so excited over something that he had planned coming to fruition. It was like watching a puppy who had received his favorite treat.

Xiao Xingchen had also seemed excited about the prospect but Song Lan had sent them a mildly suspicious stare. Thank the gods for Wen Ning's gentle features that put everyone at ease because how could someone who looked like him deceive anyone?

So they had rented a boat from a slightly terrified looking merchant. Which had been something of a downer because it had depressed Wen Ning.

Nie Mingjue was used to people being afraid of him, but every time it happened to Wen Ning it would send their youngest scuttling back into his self-conscious shell and he'd get quiet and not want to interact with anyone.

Even after all these years Wen Ning still hated people being afraid of him.

Mingjue wished he could make it so Wen Ning never had to deal with anyone being afraid of him, but that wasn't how it worked.

But they had gotten their boat. Which was a step in the right direction.

Except now Nie Mingjue was now wondering how to get him and Wen Ning out of the boat without arousing any sort of suspicion over their ulterior motive.

Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen were settled in the boat. The second oldest fierce corpse holding the oars as he made sure Xingchen was comfortable.

Now was the perfect moment.

"Oh crap," Mingjue said loudly, "Wen Ning we forgot the thing"

"The...thing?" Wen Ning blinked up from where he was trying to stabilize himself, one foot inside the boat and one foot still on the dock.

"The THING," he gestured in the direction of Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen with his elbow. Understanding flickered across Wen Ning's face.

"Oh! That thing!" he said equally loudly, "the...the thing for Sect Leader Lan!"

"Yup!" Mingjue bodily lifted Wen Ning over his shoulder and hopped out of the boat onto the dock. "We'll see you guys later! We've gotta go do the thing," he gave the boat a shove with his foot but misjudged the amount of force behind it and sent it halfway across the lake.

It was only Song Lan's quick thinking that saved the oars. Xiao Xingchen looked startled, clutching Song Lan's sleeve.

He glared at Nie Mingjue and pointed to his arms threateningly. Mingjue waved before turning on his heel and walking off, Wen Ning dangling over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. They ignored the startled looks of the people along the dock.

"Think it worked?" Wen Ning asked once he was set back down on his feet.

"Well we got them on the boat. It's up to Song Lan to not fuck it up"

Wen Ning gave him a pained look and Mingjue sighed.

Yeah. Easier said than done.

“I have an idea,” Mingjue said. Wen Ning looked ready to follow him to the gates of hell.

Chapter End Notes

braincell? what's that?

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Song Lan glared at his two friends standing on the dock.

Well, one friend standing holding the other one slung over his shoulder.

Ridiculous.

What did they think would happen?

“That’s a shame they couldn’t join us,” Xingchen said, looking genuinely disappointed. “Wen Ning seemed so excited about going on a boat ride”

Indeed Song Lan signed feeling suspicious.

Nie Mingjue was anything but subtle. His pathetic “thing” excuse wasn’t even close to believable. At the very least he could have informed Wen Ning of his plan because their youngest was incapable of deception with that face of his.

Sometimes Song Lan felt like the only braincell in their dysfunctional trio.

Song Lan just had no idea why he had lied about it.

“Song Lan?” Xingchen looked up at him. Song Lan tilted his head in response. “Since we’re already here, might as well have fun,” he smiled, “I’ve never been on a boat before”

Song Lan nodded, putting the oars in the water and using his considerable undead strength to row them deep into the middle of lake.

He watched as Xingchen reached into the water, trailing his fingers along it.

“Look! Song Lan! There’s a fish!” he said excitedly.

Song Lan smiled at him. It had been a long time since he had seen Xingchen excited.

Careful Song Lan signed *you don’t want to tip the boat*

“Even if I went overboard I wouldn’t be scared. Song Lan won’t let me drown, right?” Xingchen smiled fondly and oh god Song Lan was so in love.

Never. Song Lan signed.

Xingchen’s eyes crinkled with his smile and Song Lan had to count backwards from fifty to not lean forward and kiss him.

His friend slid along the bench.

What are you doing? Song Lan leaned to stabilize the boat as Xingchen shifted to sit on the bench next to him.

“I want to sit next to you,” Xingchen said guilelessly, “is that alright?”

Not for my heart. Song Lan thought. He was glad he was dead because Xingchen being this close to him would have killed him otherwise.

He nodded.

“Hey, Song Lan?” Song Lan tilted his head in response as he reached around Xingchen to put the oar in the water and steer them gently away from another boat. “Thank you for indulging me with this”

Of course Song Lan signed. Anything for you he privately thought.

“Can I try with the paddles?”

Oars. Song Lan spelled out but handed them to Xingchen anyways. *Do you need me to get out of the way?*

“Nope!” Xingchen smiled and dipped the oars in the water, arm around Song Lan’s back.

Yes it was a very good thing he was dead.

With ease, Xingchen pulled the oars with three powerful strokes. Song Lan marveled at the strength and may or may not have melted a little inside.

“This is fun,” Xingchen said, guiding the boat through the water. “I’m glad I got the chance to do this with you”

They ended up floating gently in the middle of the lake, Song Lan watching Xingchen as he swirled his fingers through the water with a soft smile. His hair was swept back into a high ponytail and he was wearing simple white robes and Song Lan didn’t think Xingchen had ever looked more beautiful.

Something caught his attention, like a string being tugged at the back of his neck that drew his gaze to the water behind Xiao Xingchen. He scanned the surface, trying to figure out what exactly was pulling at his consciousness when he saw the water churn slightly.

He narrowed his eyes as the familiar resentful energy of his two friends reached him.

What the hell were Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue doing under the water!?

He glanced at Xingchen who had not yet noticed the pair of idiots following their boat from beneath.

He pointed out a flock of geese to distract Xingchen before turning to glare at his fellow fierce corpses. He saw Wen Ning's head surface with an apologetic and sheepish look before he got pulled back under, presumably by Nie Mingjue.

He watched as they retreated back to the shoreline and crawled out, scaring the hell out of a couple who had been making out.

He was going to have words with those two once he got back.

But right now, his attention was only for Xiao Xingchen.

"Song Lan! Look!" he laughed, clinging to Song Lan's sleeve, "what is that?"

Swan Song Lan signed *you know swans mate for life?*

"Really?" Xingchen asked, eyes wide, "like mandarin ducks! That's sweet to think that even animals are able to find their fated pair"

Do you believe in fated pairs? Song Lan couldn't help but ask.

Xingchen sits back in the boat, looking thoughtful.

"I would like to think so," he hummed, "I've thought a lot about what the Lans seem to believe. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian, for example. Despite death and decades long separation, they still somehow found their way back to each other. Do you not think that sort of connection is fate?" he caught Song Lan's eyes, holding his gaze like he wanted to tell him something with his eyes. "That maybe they were always meant to be? Not even death could keep them apart from each other forever"

Song Lan looked at the water. He didn't know how to answer Xingchen because the answer was too close to his own heart and too close to admitting his own feelings.

He couldn't do that to Xingchen. Not after everything that had happened. The last words Xingchen had heard from him were vicious and hurtful and yet Xingchen had still given him his eyes. If he hadn't done that, he wouldn't have fallen for Xue Yang's ploy and he wouldn't have been forced to commit atrocities to the point he was willing to shatter his own soul because he didn't want to live anymore.

He considered himself lucky Xingchen even wanted to be his friend still.

"Song Lan?" Xingchen's soft voice broke through his thoughts, "where did you go, Song Lan?"

I'm here he smiled. Xingchen returned it. *Just thinking.*

"About soulmates?"

Everything. Song Lan signed. *I'm glad you were able to be brought back.*

“I didn’t want to come back,” Xingchen admitted, “but parts of my soul realized you were there and slowly pieced itself back together. I know we haven’t really talked about what happened except that day in the forest...”

I’m sorry.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Xingchen widened his eyes, “if anything I should be the one apologizing to you! I killed you”

Song Lan shook his head vehemently. *You didn’t know it was me. Xue Yang played us both. You gave me your eyes.*

“Of course I did,” Xingchen said softly, “I would give you everything”

Song Lan gripped the oars tightly and shook his head. *I don’t want you to. I just want you to be happy.*

“I’m happy with you,” he said softly. “All those years living in Yi City...all I wished for was that you were there to share that life with me”

Song Lan made the movement to reach for his hand until he caught sight of the pallid skin, the resentful energy crawling up his arms and the long black nails that seemed to grow no matter how much he tried to shorten them. He withdrew his hands in disgust, curling them back around the oars, gripping tightly.

The movement wasn’t missed on Xiao Xingchen. His friend reached out and gently pried his hand off the wood, picking out splinters before lacing their fingers together.

“Song Lan,” he sighed, “there are walls between us now, ones that weren’t there before. I don’t know how to take them down”

Song Lan simply squeezed his hand, hating that he couldn’t actually speak to Xingchen.

Although he didn’t know what he would say.

“I don’t know why the walls are there,” Xingchen said, “but this time...this time I’m not leaving,” Song Lan looked up to see the glint of determination in his eyes. Eyes identical to Song Lan’s. “I’m not going to leave you again. And I’m not going to let you leave me either you know,” he smiled. “You’re stuck with me Song Lan, for better or worse, I won’t leave your side”

Overwhelmed with love for Xiao Xingchen, Song Lan gave into the urge that he had been suppressing for months.

He kissed him.

Pulling back, panic rocketed through him at Xingchen’s surprised expression and he did the only thing he could think to do: he dove into the water and sank to the bottom, making a beeline for the shore.

The couple who had now been interrupted by three fierce corpses crawling out of the water decided that this lake was cursed and decided to go somewhere else to get their alone time.

Chapter End Notes

he almost got his shit together 😬
almost

Chapter 26

Wen Ning was worried.

The boat ride had not ended as expected.

Song Zichen had apparently done a runner and refused to tell Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue why exactly he had left Xingchen alone in the boat. He had then proceeded to do his utmost best to avoid Xiao Xingchen.

Xiao Xingchen, for his part, was stubborn as hell.

They had spent the past week playing a bizarre drawn out game of hide and seek that was less of a game and more of a war.

Him and Mingjue and A-Qing had a bet running on which one would be the winner.

A-Qing was convinced that nothing could stand in the way of a determined Xiao Xingchen. But the fierce corpses knew Song Zichen's desperation surrounding Xingchen was stronger than his resentful energy.

Wen Ning clambered up the tree to see Song Zichen peeking around the corner of Wen Ning's cottage. He couldn't see Xiao Xingchen anywhere, but he was reasonably convinced the other dao Zhang was somewhere nearby.

He leaned forward a bit more and only became aware of the cracking sound before it was too late and he was plummeting to the ground.

He sent a quick apology to the grass he was about to decimate seconds before he slammed into the ground leaving a Wen Ning-sized hole.

"Wen Qionglin!" a familiar, startled voice said. Wen Ning poked his head out from the hole to see Sect Leader Lan standing a few feet away holding his xiao and staring at the Wen Ning-shaped hole in shock. "Wen Qionglin, are you alright?" he rushed forward to offer his help but Wen Ning was already rolling out.

"Respect, Sect Leader," he bowed, "I'm dead. Nothing can hurt me anymore"

Except the skullpiercer, but he didn't think that was necessary information for the Lan Sect leader.

"Wen Qionglin," Sect Leader Lan lightly brushed the leaves off his hair. "Please be more careful with yourself, you worry Mingjue regularly"

"Sorry, Sect Leader Lan," Wen Ning bowed again.

"Why do you not take care of yourself?" Sect Leader Lan queried. Wen Ning shrugged. He didn't know how to answer the kind sect leader. He liked him well enough and he knew

Mingjue probably had stronger feelings for him than he was willing to admit. Or even realized.

But Wen Ning was still wary of sect leaders in general. Especially ones like Lan Xichen who seemed kind and mild on the surface and hid what they were really thinking behind a smile and some kind words.

Memories of Jin Guangyao were kept locked in the box along with all the other memories that would probably give him nightmares if he were to sleep.

He also wasn't sure if he should trust Nie Huaisang. Wei Wuxian had told him his suspicions. Wen Ning remembered Huaisang from the Cloud Recesses and wouldn't be surprised if Wei Wuxian had been right.

He had often wondered how Nie Huaisang had gotten away with half of what he managed to get away with during their tenure there. He had liked Huaisang well enough. They had been not quite friends but more than acquaintances and Huaisang had always been kind to him. But he had also realized the other boy was not as dumb as he seemed.

Of all the sect leaders, Jiang Cheng was the one he had the best understanding of. Whether it was because they frequently uncled anxiously in each other's direction, or because he had seen Jiang Cheng at his worst: chest split open while they replaced his golden core.

He was inextricably entwined with Jiang Cheng and because of his abrasive personality and explosive temper, Wen Ning didn't think he had to worry about Jiang Cheng being sneaky or underhanded.

With Jiang Cheng you knew where you stood whether it was bad or not as bad.

And he'd rather face outright anger than machinations hidden behind a smile.

All that to say he didn't really trust Sect Leader Lan Xichen yet.

He was tired of trusting people. He was just tired in general.

"I will try my best to be more careful"

"You don't need to be so formal with me," Sect Leader Lan smiled at him, "you're Nie Mingjue's brother, therefore I recognize you as mine as well. Please, call me Xichen," Wen Ning blinked before nodding. "May I call you Wen Ning?" he nodded again.

Lan Xichen's answering smile lit up his face and Wen Ning decided that if Lan Wangji was handsome, Lan Xichen was beautiful. Not the same level of ethereal beauty as Xiao Xingchen, but an elegant, graceful sort of beautiful. One that helpless, hopelessly clumsy Wen Ning would never possess no matter what he tried.

He instinctively tried to smooth down his tattered robes and neaten his hair.

"I'm glad I found you, by the way," Xichen said, "Mingjue told me about your discovery of the gooey corpses"

Wen Ning frowned at that.

He had been mulling over the problem ever since but had nothing new to go off of.

He had been itching to return to Yingchuan. He had written to Jiang Cheng asking about his disciples but he had yet to receive a response.

“I wanted to talk to Master Wei,” Wen Ning explained, “but he’s not here”

“I wish I knew when they were returning,” Xichen said regretfully, “as Jiang Wanyin is my brother in law, I would like to offer the assistance of the Gusu Lan Sect, but we cannot afford to send many disciples. Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi volunteered for the task...I was wondering if you would accompany them?”

“Really?” Wen Ning blinked. He had never been directly tasked with watching the juniors. It was something he had just done out of concern for A-Yuan.

“Of course,” Xichen smiled, “Mingjue told me they adore you and that you being there to take on what they can’t is good. It gives me peace of mind that they have someone relatively indestructible looking out for them. Of course, Mingjue would probably want to go too. And I’m unsure about Song-daozhang, but from what I hear it may be a good distraction. And if Wei Wuxian and my brother return, I will send them in your direction”

“I would be glad to,” Wen Ning bowed.

“No formalities, please,” Xichen laughed. “I’m glad Mingjue has you around. He feels bad about what happened with him and A-Y-Jin Guangyao. You’re his second chance to be a good big brother”

Wen Ning ducked his head. Nie Mingjue had taken to calling him didi and Wen Ning was still skittish about calling him da-ge.

Maybe he should try.

“Can you leave tomorrow?” Xichen queried. “Jingyi and Sizhui were rather anxious to get going”

“I can. I will ask Song Zichen too”

“Good,” Lan Xichen smiled. “It may be good for him to get away from the Cloud Recesses for awhile. He has seemed a bit stressed lately”

Wen Ning looked at the ground, smiling slightly.

“I’ll let you go then,” Lan Xichen smiled, resting his hand on Wen Ning’s shoulder, “good luck, Wen Ning. Stay safe”

Wen Ning watched him leave, feeling slightly conflicted. He wanted to like Lan Xichen. He really did.

Nie Mingjue approached.

“Was that about going back to investigate the strange goo corpses?” he asked. Wen Ning nodded.

“Sec-Lan Xichen wanted us to leave tomorrow”

“I’m glad to see you getting along with Xichen,” Nie Mingjue patted him on the shoulder. “I knew you two would get along well”

Wen Ning peered at the eldest fierce corpse.

“Really?”

“You’re both very similar. Both very kind and loyal”

Wen Ning ducked his head feeling pleased. He knew he could never compare to the Lan Sect Leader, but that Nie Mingjue seemed to think that way made him happy enough.

“Thank you...da-ge,” Wen Ning tested the term out quietly, but Nie Mingjue heard and the grin he sent Wen Ning was terrifying but also made Wen Ning’s heart do a little happy dance.

“SONG LAN GET BACK HERE!”

The pair startled as Song Lan burst through the trees before disappearing again.

Shortly after, Xiao Xingchen appeared looking disarrayed.

“Did you see which way he went?” he pleaded.

Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue pointed in different directions.

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